THE END WILL BE GRAPHIC

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THE END WILL BE GRAPHIC
APOCALYPTIC IN COMIC BOOKS
AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

edited by
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Introduction

Literature describing the End of Days—whether in the Tanak, the New Testament, or in noncanonical literature such as the War Scroll (1QM)—always includes both a temporal and a spatial component.[1] That is, apocalyptic literature imagines a cluster of events associated with the end taking place both in an identifiable (and often sequentially organized) time period as well as in specific (sometimes otherworldly or fantastical) places. Is it odd, then, to note that among the most influential renderings of apocalyptic literature, one finds aesthetic interpretations that prioritize images? On the one hand, this is not so surprising. Any cursory glance at apocalyptic literature will reveal a plethora of symbolic images: beasts, angels, whores, and the like. On the other hand, though, the filtering of apocalyptic emphases and themes through image complicates and confounds the oft-repeated command in apocalyptic literature for the human seers to write down the visions they encounter. In a very real way, the reliance on images to convey and interpret apocalyptic literature undercuts and renders superfluous the element of human literary interpretation of the bizarre symbols and images found therein. Images replace the priority of language-based interpretations of images, visions and experiences.

Of course, in any particular culture or discourse, images themselves have their own vocabulary and terminology, so that a particular image carries significance for a particular culture in a particular area in a particular time. An image, for example, of Osama bin Laden before 9/11, in 2005 and immediately after his assassination on 1 May 2011 would mean different things to different peoples in different areas. So, images themselves carry clusters of meanings that are endemic to specific discourses. And when images are used in tandem with words—as they are in the twentieth- and twenty-first-century sequential art forms commonly known as comics, comic books and graphic novels—multiple meanings are possible in any given discourse.

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1. This description is obviously based on the classic definition proffered by the SBL Genres Project, found in John J. Collins (ed.), *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre* (Semeia, 14; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979). In his more recent work, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (The Biblical Resource Series; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2nd edn, 1998), pp. 1-42, Collins provides a more elaborative discussion of the genre of apocalyptic literature.

Before we proceed, it will behoove us to spend a moment on the generic distinctions between the types of art mentioned in the previous paragraph.

> Comic art scholarship makes a distinction between several different types, or forms, of comic art. The simplest and perhaps the easiest to understand is the cartoon. Technically speaking, the cartoon is a single-panel work that delivers to the viewer usually one static scene. Because of its form, it lacks substance and elaboration and instead relies on inherited and easily recognizable images and conventions, such as stereotypes to convey its message (e.g., Gary Larson's *The Far Side*). As such, a cartoon is different than a comic strip, which is usually characterized as 'sequential art', that is, a piece containing several panels that has the possibility of telling a more intricate story or joke.[2]

Building on this definition of 'sequential art' offered by Will Eisner, Scott McCloud offers a broader definition for comics, writing they are 'juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer'.[3] Again, the example of Berkeley Breathed's strip 'Bloom County' illustrates this definition nicely. This definition can also encompass the comic book, 'a term that usually refers to a serialized piece of sequential art, often with more detail and depth of plot than a newspaper comic strip'.[4] McCloud's definition can also apply to the graphic novel, 'which can be a collection of comic books or simply a novel told in the form of text and images'.[5]

Alongside these comments on language, images and meaning(s), we may also note the increasing prevalence of secular or mediated renderings or understandings of the End of Days. The word 'mediated' signifies not only the role that the traditional and newer media play in disseminating odd or idiosyncratic interpretations (otherwise, why would they be 'newsworthy'?), but it also denotes one of the main claims I have made in my previous works, viz., *the view(s) many interested parties hold about biblical issues, themes or characters*

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2. Clanton, 'Cartoons and Comics', in Marc Roncace and Patrick Gray (eds.), *Teaching the Bible through Popular Culture and the Arts* (Society of Biblical Literature Resources for Biblical Study, 53; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), pp. 329-34 (329-30). This article, as well as the material above, stems from my paper titled 'Teaching Genesis through Cartoons', which I presented at the National AAR/SBL Meeting (Academic Teaching and Biblical Studies Program Unit), in Washington, DC, in November 2006.

3. McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 9. Eisner's primary theoretical work is *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practice of the World's Most Popular Art Form* (Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press, 1985).

4. Clanton, 'Cartoons and Comics', p. 330.

5. Clanton, 'Cartoons and Comics', p. 330.

are 'mediated' through later interpretations rather than the biblical text itself.[6] As I prepared this book, the news was awash with reports of an itinerant Christian group who claimed the world would end on 21 May 2011. The actual size of this group belies its reach, as various websites offer calendars, podcasts and PDF files that testify to the accuracy of its claims. The apocalyptic interpretations of this group are, in other words, *mediated* in order to render them intelligible and accessible.

As a way of illustrating both the devaluation of traditional linguistic interpretations of the End of Days as well as the mediated nature of apocalyptic images and themes, let us examine four examples: Two stem from traditional biblical texts and two from a nonbiblical context. First, consider the glorious fresco *The Last Judgment* by Giotto found in the Scrovegni Chapel. Completed in 1305, Giotto's work shows Christ sitting in judgment flanked by his disciples, the righteous worshipping him as he signals their fate with his right hand, palm up, seeming to lift them up to heaven. Conversely, his left hand, with palm down, indicates that the wicked are going nowhere other than their current and permanent residence with Satan, here portrayed as a horned demon, feasting on human flesh.

Our second example also utilizes texts from the Bible, but in a much more literal fashion. The Hungarian-born composer Franz Schmidt's last great work, *Das Buch mit sieben Siegeln* (1937), is a late-Romantic oratorio that, in its creator's own words, 'is the first attempt at a comprehensive setting' of the text(s) of the book of Revelation.[7] Structured in two parts, Schmidt scores the opening of the first six seals in Part I. This organization allows him to open Part II with an organ solo that renders the awful silence prior to the opening of the seventh seal. Following this, Schmidt recounts the build-up to the final judgment, which culminates in a powerful and moving aria by the Voice of the Lord, titled 'Ich bin das A und das O,' based on Rev. 21.5-8. As in John's Apocalypse, the oratorio ends with a recapitulation of the opening theme. The latter uses a sequence of four ascending and descending notes in varying formats, and the former recalls the assurance to the faithful that the awful

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6. See especially *Daring, Disreputable, and Devout: Interpreting the Hebrew Bible's Women in the Arts and Music* (New York and London: T&T Clark, 2009); and '"Here, There, and Everywhere": Images of Jesus in American Popular Culture,' in Philip Culbertson and Elaine M. Wainwright (eds.), *The Bible in/and Popular Culture: A Creative Encounter* (Semeia Studies, 65; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), pp. 41-60.

7. This quote, as well as other information pertaining to this piece, is taken from the booklet accompanying *Book of the Seven Seals* (Chor und Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks; cond. Franz Welser-Möst; EMI Classics 5 56660-2, 1998). See also my entry on Schmidt's oratorio in Clanton and Bryan Bibb, 'Classical Music', in *Teaching the Bible through Popular Culture and the Arts*, pp. 53-83 (77-78).

punishments described therein can be avoided, provided 'the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy' (22.11).

The other two examples are found in contexts in which traditional biblical themes and issues are not prioritized, and biblical literature does not serve as the font of meaning. In *The Return of the King*, the final volume of J.R.R. Tolkien's masterful *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the Ring has been returned to Mordor, the abode of the evil dark Lord Sauron. The Ring-Bearer, Frodo, and his trusty companion, Samwise, have defied both the odds and their own personal desires and have made the arduous journey to return the Ring to Mount Doom, wherein it was forged, in order to destroy it. Its destruction will bring about Sauron's defeat and inaugurate a new era of peace and prosperity for Middle Earth. Frodo, though, hesitates at the end of the quest. Weakened by hunger and thirst, he declares, 'I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!'[8] Frodo's hesitation does not last long, as Gollum—a hobbit-like being who was transformed into a pitiful, deformed creature by his adoration of the Ring—attacks Frodo, biting and severing the finger on which he had placed the Ring. During their struggle, Gollum falls into the fires of Mount Doom, destroying himself as well as the Ring. Even though not based on biblical literature, Tolkien's description of the impact of the Ring's destruction carries the weight of (and obvious parallels to) the Bible:

> There was a roar and a great confusion of noise. Fires leaped up and licked the roof. The throbbing grew to a great tumult, and the Mountain shook. . . . Towers fell and mountains slid; walls crumbled and melted, crashing down; vast spires of smoke and spouting steams went billowing up, up, until they toppled like an overwhelming wave, and its wild crest curled and came foaming down upon the land. And then at last over the miles between there came a rumble, rising to a deafening crash and roar; the earth shook, the plain heaved and cracked, and Orodruin reeled. Fire belched from its riven summit. The skies burst into thunder seared with lightening. Down like lashing whips fell a torrent of black rain.[9]

Following these upheavals of nature, Frodo wearily comments, 'Well, this is the end, Sam Gamgee. . . . For the quest is achieved, and now all is over. I am glad you are here with me. Here at the end of all things, Sam.'[10] Of course, all is not over for Frodo and Sam. They are rescued, healed, honored, lauded and return back to their beloved Shire. The quest and its ending, though, prove too much of a burden for Frodo, so he opts to leave Middle-Earth with the Elves, Gandalf and his adored uncle, Bilbo. His experience of the End

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8. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings, Part Three: The Return of the King* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965), p. 274.

9. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, p. 276.

10. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, pp. 276-77.

of Days as well as his extended encounter with the evil force of the Ring has wearied him. So, he records his experiences in a book that he leaves—along with all his worldly goods—to Sam, prior to sailing away.

Our final example is from the television series *Futurama*. In an episode aired on 29 July 2010 titled 'The Late Philip J. Fry', Fry is forced to break a date with Leela when the Professor and Bender force him to accompany them in the test-run of the Professor's new 'one-way' time machine (meaning it can only go forward in time). The series takes place in 3010, and the Professor accidentally takes them forward to the various years until they reach the year 1,000,000,000. They discover an earth in which no life exists, and the Professor decides it is futile to go any further into the future, noting, 'This is the end of all things.' Fry is distraught, thinking only of Leela, when he happens upon the place he was to meet her for their date in 3010. The restaurant was in a cavern, filled with stalagmites, and as Fry enters, he sees letters on the floor. Evidently, Leela had discovered that Fry had been caught in the time machine and had written him a note using the dripping water from the ceiling to form words. She tells him the time he spent with her was the best of her life. Finding some closure in this simple message, Fry proposes to the Professor and Bender that they 'grab a six-pack and watch the universe end'. As they witness the collapse of reality, Fry muses, 'Hey, uh, what was the purpose of life, anyway?' And the Professor replies, 'Who knows? Probably some hogwash about the human spirit.' Unexpectedly, the three time travelers experience a second Big Bang, which coincidentally creates a universe that is identical to the previous one. As such, the Professor's 'one-way' time machine can now get them home, which it does after overshooting their year and undergoing yet another Big Bang.

The point of mentioning these four examples is simple: *Apocalyptic imagery and themes pervade not only cultural products that employ specifically biblical imagery but are also found in media that do not purport to impart biblical or even religious messages*. It seems clear that concern over the end has been a constant historically and culturally, and our own time is no different, save the media through which those concerns are expressed and shared. This volume focuses on one specific genre of media, namely, graphic sequential art, more commonly known as comic books and/or graphic novels.

Why focus on comics? Why not focus on artistic interpretations like that of Giotto, mentioned above? Or perhaps a musical rendering, like Olivier Messiaen's haunting *Quator pour la fin du temps* (1940), based on texts from Revelation, written while the composer was interred in a concentration camp?[11] The reason is threefold. First, there are already other texts that focus

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11.   Again, see my entry on Messiaen's piece in Clanton and Bibb, 'Classical Music', pp. 76-77.

on other aesthetic genres that interpret apocalyptic images and themes.[12] Second, comics and comic art serve (albeit at times unknowingly) as both instigators and/or transmitters of cultural discourses, values and mores. This should be obvious, as this genre of art has profoundly influenced our popular culture; 'be it *Peanuts* or *Spider-Man* . . . comic art has indeed infiltrated our cultural psyche.'[13] Further, comics here in the United States predate both television and recorded music, and emerged at roughly the same time as motion pictures. Wiley Lee Umphlett argues for their usefulness as cultural storehouses of what he calls 'the unique personal expressions, fantasies, and fancies of thousands of our forgotten yesterdays', and it is this function, along with their influence on popular culture, that makes them worthwhile targets of study.[14] Third, not only have comic books/graphic novels consistently included biblical narratives, characters, images and themes, but I would argue that *comic books are the medium that come the closest to approximating the imaginative malleability found in biblical interpretation.*[15] For example, if we compare the character of Moses found in the plague cycle in Exodus with the Moses that speaks in Deuteronomy with the Moses mentioned in Hebrews with the Moses in the pseudepigraphal *Testament of Moses*, we will find a different character, different stories and different emphases that reflect the different communities that produced, edited and transmitted these texts.[16] Similarly, if we compare Bob Kane's original 1939 Batman with other, later Batmen—such as those drawn and written by Neal Adams, Frank Miller, Jeph Loeb and Paul Dini, to name a few—we will see some stark differences not

12. See, e.g., John Walliss and Kenneth G.C. Newport (eds.), *The End All Around Us: The Apocalypse and Popular Culture* (Millennialism and Society Series; Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2009); and John Walliss and Lee Quinby (eds.), *Reel Revelation: Apocalypse and Film* (Bible in the Modern World, 31/The Apocalypse and Popular Culture, 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010).

13. Clanton, 'Cartoons and Comics', p. 329.

14. Umphlett, 'The Nostalgic Vision in Comic-Strip Art', in *Mythmakers of the American Dream: The Nostalgic Vision in Popular Culture* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1983), pp 73-112 (74).

15. For examples of this malleability in traditional biblical interpretation, see James L. Kugel, *The Bible as It Was* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); and Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (trans. Marion Wiesel; New York: Summit Books, 1976).

16. Several scholars have tracked the journeys of various biblical characters through art, literature, music and later scriptural interpretations. Some of these include Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995); Kim Paffenroth, *Judas: Images of the Lost Disciple* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); as well as my own *The Good, the Bold, and the Beautiful: The Story of Susanna and its Renaissance Interpretations* (Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies, 430; New York & London: T&T Clark, 2006).

only in characterization but also in tone, themes and morals.[17] Put differently, not only the interpretive potentialities inherent in the genre of comic books, but also the creative communal continuities—by which I mean the web-like systems of meaning(s) that are constructed between (a) a character's history, (b) the story arc of a specific narrative, and (c) the knowledge and reactions of the communities of 'fanboys'—parallel the processes by and through which the biblical text interprets itself and has been interpreted in various communities, discourses, genres and time periods. As such, the hermeneutics of reading comic books parallels those of engaging biblical literature, so that it is entirely appropriate to focus on comic books/graphic novels as a conduit though which apocalyptic images and themes flow.

How do the chapters in the book assist the curious in understanding the presence and use of apocalyptic imagery and themes in modern comic books and graphic novels? First, the chapters that follow focus on a wide variety of examples, some stemming from mainstream comics (those published by large corporations such as DC and Marvel Comics) and others from Independent (Indie) or Creator-Owned comics (work that tends to be more experimental, less commercial and less tied to a specific mythos or universe of narrative continuity than mainstream titles). Second, our authors come from a wide variety of backgrounds: some hail from traditional academic fields, such as religious studies and English; others are from outside the academy but bring years of expertise in reading, reflecting and writing on and even creating graphic novels and comics. Finally, all of them focus on how both specific and general themes and issues that originate in or are based on biblical apocalyptic literature are found in and/or influence comics and graphic novels using a variety of methods, approaches and examples.

In Part I, the focus is on Indie/Creator-Owned works, and we begin with Aaron Kashtan's exploration of the work of Kevin Huizenga. In his chapter, Kashtan discusses Huizenga's short story "Jeepers Jacobs," in which the title character—a theologian whose main area of research is the Christian doctrine of hell—tries to convert an acquaintance with odd and fatal results. Emily Laycock then introduces us to the work of Basil Wolverton. Laycock demonstrates in her work the overwhelming influence of Herbert W. Armstrong and his apocalyptic Worldwide Church of God on Wolverton's work, especially his biblical art. In her chapter, Diana Green examines Alan Moore's *Promethea*, a character whose purpose is to initiate an apocalypse but whose journey is much more complicated. Finally, A. David

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17. In his work, Les Daniels recounts the 'storied' history of Batman through the years. See his *Batman, the Complete History: The Life and Times of the Dark Knight* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999). For a wonderfully imaginative illustration of the different Batmen, see an episode from the animated series *The New Batman Adventures* titled, 'Legends of the Dark Knight' (Season 2; originally aired 10-10-98).

Lewis engages some of the more humorous and, well, profane examples of apocalyptic imagery in recent Indie comics, such as *Battle Pope* and *The Chronicles of Wormwood.*

Part II, which examines more mainstream works, begins with Terry Ray Clark's adroit examination of how *Kingdom Come* utilizes both the functions and forms of ancient apocalyptic literature. Greg Stevenson then analyzes a variety of texts—including *X-Men: The Age of Apocalpyse* and issues #666 of *Superman* and *Batman*—to discern the way(s) in which the mythological language of apocalyptic and the mythology of superheroes interact. And finally, Greg Garrett provides his own end to our collection through a broad and thoughtful rumination on the two most widely read mainstream comics that deal with the End of Days: *Kingdom Come* and *Watchmen.*

As with all biblical interpretations, context(s) are determinative. Our world today seems perpetually on the brink of the next big disaster, the one that will push us into chaos, anarchy and, possibly, annihilation. In a context such as this, one should expect more attention to be paid to apocalyptic images and themes. However, the converse is also true in that in times like these, humanity needs its heroes more than ever. In such a time, cogitating and ruminating on comics and graphic novels that appropriate and employ apocalyptic metaphors and tropes allow us to embrace both halves of our nature: the pessimistic and the optimistic. And hopefully this engagement will lead us away from our darkest night and toward our brightest day.

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Part I

Independent and/or Creator-Owned Comic Books and Graphic Novels

1. A Network of Lines That Intersect: Apocalyptic Imagery and Comics Form in Kevin Huizenga's 'Jeepers Jacobs'

Aaron Kashtan

Harvey Pekar, the creator of *American Splendor*, famously said 'Comics are words and pictures. You can do anything with words and pictures!' Taken at face value, this statement merely makes an obvious claim: comics are composed of words and pictures, and thus they combine the two major types of signifiers recognized by traditional theories of the arts. Yet we can also interpret Pekar's statement in a more radical way: comics are words and pictures *at once*; the words of a comic are simultaneously pictures, and vice versa. And perhaps this is why, as Pekar's statement implies, one can do anything with comics. Such a condition of combined visual-verbality would have profound implications for the presentation of either imagery or language in comics. In comics neither imagery nor language can be interpreted independently, because each partakes of the other. The word in comics is transformed and inflected by the image, as the image is by the word. This is true even when comics present words as sacred and seemingly inflexible, as those of the biblical account of the apocalypse, as occurs in the comic I examine in this chapter, Kevin Huizenga's short story 'Jeepers Jacobs'.

Born in 1971 in Harvey, Illinois, Huizenga is best known for his short stories featuring the character Glenn Ganges, who bears a certain resemblance to the author but is not a self-portrait. 'Jeepers Jacobs', Huizenga's longest and best-known story, was published in 2004 in the fifth volume of the anthology *Kramer's Ergot*. The following year it was nominated for an Eisner Award, the most prestigious award in American comics, in the category of Best Short Story.

In a 2007 interview, Huizenga noted that the original impetus for this story was his desire to create apocalyptic imagery: to 'adapt some nonfiction about hell and draw some awesome pictures of Dante-esque landscapes with writh-

ing bodies and so forth'.[1] In the course of his research, however, he became less interested in hell itself than in the psychology of those who believe in it:

> But once I started reading these conservative defenses of hell, I became interested in the guys writing these books. I thought, 'what kind [of] person spends all this time defending the idea of eternal torment for the majority of the human race?' What kind of mental gymnastics do you have to do to defend something like that and meditate on something like that and not go a little crazy?

Despite being religious himself, Huizenga evidently felt that the 'traditional' view of hell—as a place of eternal and justified punishment for sinners and nonbelievers—was unpalatable on moral grounds. The purpose of 'Jeepers Jacobs' is to explain, both to Huizenga himself and to audiences with similar views on hell, how a person could sincerely believe in 'eternal torment for the majority of the human race'.[2]

Huizenga's answer to this question is Jeepers Jacobs, a conservative professor of theology who specializes in the doctrine of hell. The story begins when Glenn's brother, a colleague of Jeepers, invites Glenn to a round of golf along with Jeepers and another professor. While driving Glenn home after the golf game, Jeepers discovers that Glenn does not attend church. A week later, Jeepers writes an essay in which he defends the traditionalist view of hell against an opposing view which is popular among American evangelical Christians: annihilationism, or the view that sinners' souls will simply cease to exist after death.[3] As Jeepers writes in support of the position that unbelievers will eventually suffer 'eternal conscious torment', he feels increasingly guilty for having made no attempt to save Glenn from this fate. Jeepers therefore arranges another golf game with Glenn for the purpose of proselytizing him. Instead, however, Jeepers unaccountably tells Glenn the story of his failed attempt to become a professional golfer. During the golf game, Jeepers suffers a fatal heart attack, and the story ends.

This sequence of events raises two key questions: Why does Jeepers believe a dogma that, in the author's view, is morally repugnant, and why does he ultimately fail to act in accordance with this belief by evangelizing Glenn? To

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1. Chris Arrant, 'Curses: A Blessing from Kevin Huizenga—2/6/2007—Publishers Weekly'. Interview with Kevin Huizenga. http://www.drawnandquarterly.com/newsList. php?item=a45ca3b01401df, paragraph 13 (accessed 30 August 2009).

2. Arrant, 'Curses', paragraph 13.

3. The debate between annihilationist and traditionalist views of hell is not Huizenga's invention but represents an actual controversy within the evangelical movement. See the sources quoted in 'Jeepers Jacobs' itself, most notably Edward William Fudge and Robert A. Peterson, *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical and Theological Dialogue* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2000).

answer the first question, we examine the scene in which Jeepers writes his essay. After summarizing the 'annihilationist' and 'traditionalist' positions, Jeepers quotes the claim of Clark Pinnock—a real person, like all the other theologians Jeepers cites—that 'it just does not make sense' that a loving God would torture people infinitely for the sins of a finite life, or that a post-apocalyptic 'new creation' would include a 'lake with souls burning endlessly in it'.[4] Jeepers introduces his own case with the words, 'But our views should rest on Scripture and not logic, not what does or doesn't "make sense."'[5] For Jeepers, the only standard for evaluating a doctrine about hell is whether it agrees with the Bible, which is the only trustworthy source of information on eschatological matters. This belief is not unique to traditionalists like Jeepers, but is shared by his annihilationist opponents. In their joint introduction to a book about the annihilationism–traditionalism debate, Edward Fudge and Robert Peterson, an annihilationist and a traditionalist respectively, state, 'Evangelical Christians agree that the only reliable source to tell us God's truth about eternal destinies is the Bible.'[6] Both sides in this debate agree that the debate can be settled only by reference to the words of the Bible. They disagree only in their interpretation of what the Bible actually says. The two sides are also united in their opposition to 'universalism', which, in this context, means the belief that everyone, including sinners and unbelievers, will be saved and that nobody will go to hell. Again, the alleged problem with universalism is that the words of Scripture do not support it. Fudge and Peterson note, 'Although a vast number of clergy around the world hold this view, we reject it as contradicting the teaching of Scripture,' specifically Mt. 25.31-34, 41, 46. They add, 'Truth is not derived by taking opinion polls but by carefully studying God's Word.'[7] A further premise on which Jeepers's belief depends is that the word of God is ultimately clear and understandable. If this word is the only guide to the mysteries of the afterlife and of post-apocalyptic existence, it must also be a clear guide; it must have a singular, non-self-contradictory meaning, and that meaning must be understandable by human readers. Accordingly, just before beginning to write, Jeepers reads in an unidentified book that 'the Biblical doctrine of eternal punishment is as clear as a teaching can be; it is naught but human emotionalism that obscures the issue for some' and thinks 'Exactly right'.[8]

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4. Kevin Huizenga, *Curses* (Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2006), p. 123.

5. Huizenga, *Curses*, p. 123.

6. Fudge and Peterson, *Two Views of Hell*, p. 11.

7. Fudge and Peterson, *Two Views of Hell*, p. 14.

8. Huizenga, *Curses*, p. 120. The source for this quotation appears to be Wayne Jackson, 'The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment', *Christian Courier* 11 August 1999, no page number given. http://www.christiancourier.com/articles/95-the-doctrine-of-eternal-punishment (accessed 30 August 2009).

For Jeepers, then, the debate over hell is a matter of words. The only way to resolve this debate is by clarifying and correctly interpreting the meaning of the divine word, and Jeepers seeks to do so through the medium of his own written words. As Jeepers writes, however, a curious thing happens: His words become associated with images, and these images increasingly affect his own words as well as shaking his faith in the clarity and supremacy of the divine word. For the first few pages of the essay-writing scene, Huizenga's images are mostly subordinate to his words. Most of the panels on pages 120 and 121 depict Jeepers writing, drinking coffee, practicing golf, or talking with his wife. Two other panels depict theologians whose words Jeepers is quoting. These images merely serve to illustrate the words Jeepers is writing or quoting, and those words are the primary focus of the reader's attention. On the lower half of page 122, however, the images take on a slightly more independent role. All the words in panels 7 to 14 of page 122 are quoted from an essay by Millard Erickson. In panel 9, the caption states that all humans are naturally sinners and that they can only be saved through Jesus Christ. The accompanying illustration shows Glenn with a worried look on his face. Implicitly, this panel represents Jeepers's thoughts as he reads these words: When he reads about unbelieving sinners, Jeepers imagines Glenn. The caption to panel 10 continues, 'Belief is necessary to obtain the salvation achieved by Christ.' The accompanying image shows Glenn with a smug facial expression as he thinks about Jesus (as indicated by a thought balloon containing an image of Jesus). The caption in panel 11 states, continuing the quotation, that Christians are therefore obliged to tell unbelievers the good news and warn them of the danger of hell. However, the panel shows Glenn and Jeepers sitting silently in Jeepers's car, indicating that Jeepers is now remembering how he defaulted on the obligation mentioned in the caption. Panel 11 is wordless, and the image shows Jeepers looking at his book, which suggests a momentary pause in his thought. In panel 12 the caption notes that members of other religions, 'no matter how sincere their belief or intense their religious activity, are spiritually lost apart from Christ'.[9] The image depicts a Muslim man praying. With his hands folded and his eyes closed, the man looks serene and earnest; he hardly seems to be 'spiritually lost'. In panel 13 the caption mentions heaven, and the image is of Jeepers's conception of heaven: a beautiful golf course where he plays alongside Jesus. Finally, the caption to panel 14 describes hell, 'a place of unending suffering and separation from God'.[10] The image, distinctively colored in dark red tones, depicts Glenn and the Muslim man with closed eyes and sad faces. Such a fate strikes the reader as unduly harsh, especially given the reader's

9. Huizenga, *Curses*, p. 122.
10. Huizenga, *Curses*, p. 122.

previous acquaintance with Glenn, and given that the previous image of the Muslim man presented him in a positive light.

Jeepers's thinking in these panels is entirely visual; the things he visualizes, such as Glenn, the Muslim, and the heavenly golf course, never make it into his internal monologue. His experience with Glenn is having an effect on him that he cannot account for in words. Moreover, from the reader's perspective, Huizenga's images challenge the authority of Jeepers's verbal narrative. The images sometimes reverse the value judgments found in the words and characterize Jeepers's philosophy as cruel rather than logically necessary.

This effect becomes even stronger on the following page as Jeepers takes a break from his writing to watch a televised golf tournament. He interrupts himself just after writing the words 'with the' in the sentence 'Let's take a look at some of their arguments, starting with the words of our Lord himself,' interposing a lacuna in the middle of the divine word. While watching golf, Jeepers muses that he doesn't think Tiger Woods is a believer [he is correct—Tiger Woods is a Buddhist], and he pictures Tiger standing in line behind Glenn.[11] Both are colored in the dark red tones seen in panel 14 of page 122. Over the next few panels Jeepers mentally adds other unbelievers and sinners to the queue, including Judas Iscariot, Hitler, Osama bin Laden, his brother-in-law Frank, and Bertrand Russel [*sic*]. While Jeepers's mental images on the previous page were isolated in separate panels, on this page Huizenga depicts Jeepers and his mental images in the same visual field, indicating the degree to which these images have intruded upon Jeepers. He is beginning to realize that under the traditionalist view, some who don't truly deserve 'eternal conscious torment' will end up suffering it anyway; nor will any distinction be made between blameless unbelievers like Glenn, or admirable unbelievers like Tiger, and the worst villains in human history. Jeepers cannot verbalize these thoughts, which are incompatible with his belief system, yet neither can he escape them. Perhaps more important, the reader is now seeing the horrid consequences of Jeepers's beliefs.

On page 124 the images temporarily return to their subordinate role. First we see Jeepers writing, and then when Jeepers quotes Matthew 25, the images show Jesus speaking these words to his disciples. On page 125, Jeepers reads from an article by Robert Peterson that discusses the annihilationist and traditionalist positions. Here Jeepers visualizes an annihilationist and a traditionalist having a debate; the former has the appearance of Glenn's brother Wayne, and the latter takes the form of Jeepers's conservative colleague Paul Pals. Again, at first these images are relatively innocuous, but they become less so when

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11. This scene takes on an additional layer of irony in light of recent revelations about Tiger Woods's marital infidelities. Jeepers's admiration for Tiger, despite the latter's lack of Christian faith, now seems like one more way in which Jeepers sees the world as clearer and less confusing than it really is.

the theologians discuss Rev. 14:10-11, which mentions that the wicked will be 'tormented with burning sulfur' and that 'the smoke of their torment rises for ever'. Wayne claims that in the Old Testament, the phrase 'burning sulfur' is used in accounts of the destruction of cities, which burn and then cease to exist. By analogy, the souls of the unsaved will burn and be consumed, and the smoke will serve merely as a sign of their destruction. Here Jeepers imagines a city burning to the ground, and a column of smoke rising from it. Yet he is not persuaded by this (comparatively) comforting argument, because Paul Pals mentions that the text continues, 'There is no rest day or night for the wicked'. Panel 14 shows a column of smoke rising from an abyss and is colored in the dark red tones that the reader has now learned to associate with hell. In the last panel of the page, Wayne counters with a quotation that does not appear in Peterson's article: 'That text doesn't prove eternal suffering, just eternal smoke.' With this ridiculous phrase, Wayne's position reduces itself to absurdity. The invocation of 'eternal smoke' suggests that Wayne is disingenuously avoiding the obvious implication of the text: that where there's eternal smoke, there must be eternal fire. And next we see, through Jeepers's eyes, what that would look like. On turning the page the reader sees the largest panel in *Curses*: a full-page splash which repeats the red-tinted column-of-smoke image. This image extends to the border of the page on all four sides, and contrasts dramatically in size with the small panels that make up most of the story. It thus represents a horrible vision of the unbounded duration of hell. And if Jeepers's belief system is correct, this is the fate to which Jeepers's inaction has condemned Glenn. This line of thinking continues on page 128, when Jeepers imagines Glenn being shoved into a pit by a hairy, horned devil, then suffocated by sulfurous flames. Jeepers argues in his article that the Bible does *not* specifically mention that sinners will be tormented in either of these ways. However, he cannot avoid imagining Glenn in the grip of such torments, suggesting that his images are again taking on a life of their own.

These pathetic and horrific images strengthen the reader's (and possibly also Jeepers's) doubts as to whether unbelievers really deserve eternal conscious torment. Yet Jeepers's visions of the fate that awaits unbelievers also increase his desire to save them from that fate. Thus he concludes his article by arguing that if hell is indeed a place of eternal torment, then evangelicals must be adamant about spreading this truth, whether or not it is politically correct to do so:

> But overall the Bible is clear: hell is eternal conscious torment...Certain theologians and pastors try to blur these texts. I suspect that the universalist fairy tales told by postmodern liberals have influenced this desire to over-turn the traditional view of hell in evangelical circles.[12]

12. Huizenga, *Curses*, p. 129.

Here Jeepers invokes an argument commonly encountered in traditionalist literature about hell: that the decline in the doctrine of hell is due to postmodernism (or 'pluralism', a term which means more or less the same thing). As characterized by evangelicals like Peterson and D.A. Carson, postmodernism includes a touchy-feely reluctance to offend, a belief that no culture or philosophical doctrine is superior to any other, and a loss of faith in the possibility of objective truth. Thus, 'postmodern liberals' supposedly censor the message of the divine word—that unbelief leads to eternal conscious torment—in the interest of sensitivity or cultural relativism. For evangelicals, the liberal value of 'tolerance' only gets in the way of the truth, as illustrated by the following quotation from James Merritt:

> We are unapologetic in our belief that Christ is the only way to heaven. I know, in a day of political correctness, that sounds somewhat intolerant, but you know, when I go to the doctor and he examines me, I want my doctor to be very intolerant. I want him to tell me exactly what the problem is and what the solution is.[13]

For evangelicals like Jeepers, values such as pluralism and tolerance only end up preventing unbelievers from hearing or reading the divine word, as seen in the dramatic title of Carson's book *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism*.

Yet postmodernism challenges the supremacy not just of the biblical word, but of the word in general. Jean-François Lyotard defines postmodernism in terms of the collapse of grand narratives and the reduction of privileged social discourses to language games. 'Grand narratives' are not exclusively verbal, but the word is the privileged form in which they are disseminated. Moreover, the postmodern era has been called the civilization of the image.[14] It is an age in which images, having lost their 'aura' of unicity and sanctity, become as accessible, manipulable and ubiquitous as words. The phenomenon that Jeepers thinks of as postmodernism is thus characterized by the collapse of the dominant position of words and by the ascension of images to *equality* with words. As we have just seen, the reason Jeepers's faith in the traditionalist view of hell has been shaken is because his mental images have infringed on his words, and the reason Jeepers's views have lost credibility with the reader is because the images depicted the cruel implications of those views. Moreover, Jeepers's disturbing thoughts about hell begin in earnest only after he sees the televised image of Tiger Woods, an image that is made available to him by one of the key visual technologies of the contemporary era.

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13. James Merritt, 'The Only Way to Heaven', in B. Abernethy and W. Bole (eds.), *The Life of Meaning: Reflections on Faith, Doubt and Repairing the World* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), p. 352.

14. Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 1.

One potential reason for the collapse of the authority of grand narratives and of authoritative words is that a single-minded reliance on these things leaves one unable to cope with the complexity and randomness of life in contemporary times. As we have seen, the biblical account of the apocalypse, in Jeepers's view, possesses a singular and perfectly clear meaning. It establishes a path from which any deviation is blasphemous and deadly; it sets up a clear line that the believer must follow uninterruptedly in order to be saved. The trouble with such clear lines is that one rarely finds them in real life. A leading 'postmodern' literary critic, J. Hillis Miller, explains that straight lines convey no useful information: '[E]very straight line is like every other straight line in its featureless perfection,' but 'for that very reason it is impossible to tell which line is being cited.'[15] Lines only become carriers of information when they are subjected to *repetition*, which is Miller's name for 'anything that happens to the line to trouble its straightforward linearity: returnings, knottings, recrossings, crinklings to and fro, suspensions, interruptions'.[16] Here Miller uses 'the line' to refer simultaneously to drawn or written lines—i.e. letters and pictures—and to the figurative lines of narratives. For Miller, interruptions or complications in drawn lines or story lines do not represent breakdowns in signification or of narrative. Rather, repetition is the basic condition of possibility of signification and narration. No line is recognizably itself until it departs from perfect straightness.

When Jeepers finally gets his chance to tell Glenn the good news, he fails to do so because he diverts himself from the conversational 'line' he intends to follow. At the same time, we learn that Jeepers's own life story is an example of repetition rather than straight linearity. Jeepers has learned from Wayne that Glenn gave up going to church after becoming interested in science, so Jeepers begins his attempt at proselytization by asking Glenn about the science classes he took in college. Glenn replies that he studied astronomy, because as a child he visited the desert in New Mexico and was impressed by the sight of the stars. This surprises Jeepers, causing him to diverge from the conversational line he meant to take. He replies that he himself grew up in Arizona: 'I probably took it too much for granted, myself, the stars ... That's really neat.'[17] Glenn replies 'Arizona, huh? You could go golfing all year round there, right?' This surprises Jeepers a second time and causes him to set off on a totally different path from the one he intended to take. Given the opportunity, Jeepers cannot resist talking about his history with golf, and he spends most of the next two pages doing so. Here the reader learns that Jeepers's own life has already been marked by a major departure from linearity. Jeepers's

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15. J. Hillis Miller, *Ariadne's Thread: Story Lines* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 8.

16. Miller, *Ariadne's Thread*, p. 17.

17. Huizenga, *Curses*, p. 132.

original career goal was to become a professional golfer. He was 'absolutely hooked on the game' and saw the PGA Tour as an opportunity to 'do what you love for a living'.[18] His first four attempts at 'Q School', the PGA Tour's qualifying tournament, were unsuccessful. On his fifth try, he was playing well enough to give him a good chance at finally qualifying, until he made a careless mistake. He hit a tee shot out of bounds for a one-stroke penalty. Assuming he wouldn't be able to find the original ball, Jeepers hit another ball as a 'provisional ball'. However, he forgot to declare his intention to hit a provisional ball, as mandated by the rules; therefore, he was guilty of an illegal substitution, which carries a two-stroke penalty. One of Jeepers's partners noticed this but intentionally neglected to tell Jeepers. After Jeepers turned in his scorecard, the other player notified the officials, and Jeepers was disqualified for submitting an incorrect scorecard. Jeepers took this crushing experience 'as God's way of saying I should give up the quest' and made a career change from golf to theology.[19] Jeepers tries to present himself as a depersonalized conduit for the divine narrative, as a disciple of Jesus whose only goal is to 'carry on his work' regardless of personal feelings.[20] At the end of his article he suggests that evangelism is the only trajectory a true Christian can take, the only line a Christian can follow. Yet Jeepers has in fact arrived at evangelism by a far more convoluted route. He was diverted from his original career path and set onto his current one because of an essentially random, unpredictable occurrence. Jeepers's own life story is a better example of the randomness and complication associated with postmodernism than of the clarity and straight linearity associated with the biblical grand narrative. Similarly, it is because Jeepers's conversation with Glenn takes a random and unexpected turn that he fails to complete his mission of telling Glenn the good news.

So what ultimately happens in this story is that the clarity and linearity of the divine narrative of the apocalypse proves to be unsupportable: first, because the authority of the biblical doctrine of the apocalypse is challenged by images that reveal the basic unfairness of that doctrine; and second, because the straightforward linear progression of the biblical account proves to be unrepresentative of the random, convoluted nature of real-world stories and lives. We might summarize these two reasons by saying that over the course of the story, the biblical narrative of the apocalypse is unmasked as merely a collection of lines, with no more authority than any other such collection.

But if the biblical narrative is an arbitrary collection of lines, then the same is true in an even more literal sense of 'Jeepers Jacobs' itself. In the last section of this chapter, I want to consider how Huizenga leverages the

18. Huizenga, *Curses*, pp. 132 and 133.
19. Huizenga, *Curses*, p. 134.
20. Huizenga, *Curses*, p. 128.

formal and material resources of the comics medium in order to demonstrate how comics itself, like the biblical narrative, is a collection of lines, none of which are uniquely privileged above the others. By way of proving this claim, I want to suggest, first, that Huizenga's style is significantly 'linear'. In 'Jeepers Jacobs', as in most of his oeuvre, Huizenga typically depicts objects as blocks of solid colors enclosed by lines of relatively uniform thickness. Depth and three-dimensionality are suggested mostly by perspective cues; Huizenga avoids using techniques like shading or cross-hatching to create a more realistic modeling of volumes. Huizenga's pages thus have a flat, two-dimensional appearance. Furthermore, Huizenga rarely uses linework for merely decorative purposes. Nearly every line he draws is to be understood as the contour of an object that exists within the diegetic world. Although he does use nondiegetic linework, such as for cross-hatching, shading and detail, it rarely seems to play a crucial role in his drawings. The cross-hatching and shading mostly serve the purpose of irrelevant detail; and if these elements were removed, his artwork would still make almost as much sense.

The overall effect of these techniques is to suggest that Huizenga's stories take place in a brightly visible, orderly realm, a visual world where every line represents an object and where every object is clearly delineated from every other object. Now I have repeatedly referred to clarity and linearity on purpose, because these features of Huizenga's style are also characteristic of a tradition of French and Belgian comics known as Clear Line, or *ligne claire*. Although the term Clear Line was coined in 1977 by a Dutch artist, Joost Swarte, the style to which it refers was one of the dominant aesthetic tendencies in Franco-Belgian comics from the 1940s to the 1960s. The most notable Clear Line artist was the Belgian cartoonist Georges Remi, better known as Hergé (1907-1983), whose best-known series is *The Adventures of Tintin*. Hergé is the only Clear Line artist who is widely known in the United States, but he was one of many masters of the style. Other notable Clear Line artists who were contemporaries of his, and whose works were serialized in the *Tintin* magazine, include Edgar-Pierre Jacobs, Jacques Martin, Bob de Moor and Willy Vandersteen.[21] The standard Clear Line style has many of the features I ascribed to Huizenga's work. For example, in Hergé's artwork, 'carefully selected, thoroughly researched and scrupulously copied details had precise, well-defined lines, that lack of shadow emphasized; everything was arranged according to the rules of perspective and proportion.'[22] Clear Line artwork is bright, unambiguous and well ordered. During the heyday of the style, these

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21. Several books by Jacobs and Vandersteen have been translated into English and are currently in print. I am not aware of any English translations of the works of Martin or de Moor.

22. Matthew Screech, *Masters of the Ninth Art: Bandes dessinées and Franco-Belgian Identity* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), p. 27.

qualities were typically shared by the stories that Clear Line artwork was used
to tell. Clear Line comics were usually intended for younger or all-ages audi-
ences. The slogan of *Tintin* magazine was *Le journal des jeunes de 7 à 77 ans*
(the journal for youths from 7 to 77 years old). Stories in these comics often
revolved around one or two protagonists, sometimes accompanied by a cute
animal mascot, who involve themselves in globe-trotting adventures.[23] These
stories usually follow an Aristotelian linear progression in which all the nar-
rative threads introduced at the start of the story are wrapped up by the end.[24]
Because it symbolized the classic era of Franco-Belgian comics, and because it
was traditionally associated with a narratively conventional and child-friendly
mode of storytelling, the Clear Line style later became a popular target of
parodies and ironic reappropriations. In 1980s revivals of the Clear Line
style, like Max's *Peter Pank* and Yves Chaland's *Freddy Lombard,* the squeaky-
clean graphic style contrasts oddly with the unsavory subject matter it is used
to depict, including semi-explicit sexual activity and violent real-life events.[25]

The stylistic resemblance between Huizenga's work and Hergé's has often
been noted. One of the blurbs on the back cover of *Curses* states that Hui-
zenga 'reminds me of a deadpan, slapstick, surreal, suburban Hergé'. This
resemblance must not be overstated.[26] Huizenga is clearly not a member of
the Clear Line school, inasmuch as he comes from the largely unrelated sty-
listic tradition of American alternative comics. Indeed, Huizenga admitted in
an interview in 2008 that he had read only one Tintin album, viz. *Tintin in
Tibet*, which is generally considered Hergé's masterpiece. However, the resem-
blance between Huizenga's work and Hergé's is no accident. In the interview,
Huizenga continued:

> I'm interested in Tintin and other clear-line style, serialized European com-
> ics as a style of story-telling. I haven't read very many of them because in a
> strange way I'm too afraid of being overly influenced by them—I want to be

23. This overarching generic model is common to other Franco-Belgian comics that
do not employ the Clear Line artistic style, such as Goscinny and Uderzo's *Asterix* and
Franquin's *Spirou et Fantasio*, but *Tintin* and Jacobs's *Blake et Mortimer* constitute canonical
examples of this genre.

24. The exception that proves this rule is the late *Tintin* album *The Castafiore Emeralds*,
which is full of hints and suggestions that seem to promise an exciting story but that
ultimately lead nowhere; at the end of the story, it turns out that the thief who stole the
eponymous jewels was a magpie.

25. Both these works have been at least partially translated into English but are now
out of print.

26. When I delivered an earlier version of this paper at the 2008 New Narrative con-
ference in Toronto, the eminent comics scholar Jean-Paul Gabilliet objected that Huizenga
was not a Clear Line artist. I hope I have sufficiently answered this objection here. I am
not literally characterizing Huizenga as a member of the Clear Line school; I am merely
arguing that the resemblance between Huizenga's artwork and Clear Line is interesting.

influenced by them more by glancing at them and dreaming up what they must be like.[27]

Huizenga's work does something similar to the work of Clear Line revivalists like Max and Chaland, though in a very different way and from a different cultural perspective. Huizenga takes the Clear Line style (or, rather, his imaginary conception of the Clear Line style) and unmasks the metaphysical assumptions that go along with it. The Clear Line style suggests a bright and orderly visual-narrative world where every drawn line represents a single object which is identifiable and differentiable from every other object, and where every narrative line leads straight to its logical destination. What Huizenga reveals is that this narrative world is merely an assemblage of *lines on paper*, and that these lines are inflected by repetition.

One way in which Huizenga reveals this is through his use of the same style of line work for lettering and drawing. In traditional modes of commercial comics production, both in North America and in Europe, the words appearing in a comic are typically hand-drawn; however, there is usually a division of labor between the artist who produces the artwork and the artist who draws the letters, known as the 'letterer'.[28] This sometimes results in a notable disparity between the line work of the art and that of the lettering, although the reader is not expected to notice this, because comics lettering follows the traditional principle that the graphic qualities of letters should be invisible. In both French and English editions of *Tintin*, a notable disparity exists between Hergé's linework and that of his letterer(s). For example, Hergé's American letterer uses a thick, nonhomogeneous line that clashes with the standardized contours of the panels. By contrast, Huizenga does his own lettering, which is the typical practice in American 'independent' or 'alternative' comics. Moreover, the lines of Huizenga's letters are stylistically similar to the lines of his artwork. On Huizenga's pages, all the lines have the same thickness and weight, regardless of whether these lines are to be understood as letters, as pictures of objects in the diegetic world, or as elements that blur these two categories, such as panel borders, word balloons or caption boxes. The inherent falsehood of the distinction between 'textual' and 'graphic' elements is exposed by means of a visual assimilation of the one element to the other. A dramatic example occurs in Huizenga's pamphlet *How to Start to Think about Learning to Draw Comics,* a publicity brochure for the School of Cartoon Studies in White River Junction, Vermont. On several pages of this

27. Nicolas Verstappen, 'du9—L'autre bande dessinée—Kevin Huizenga,. Interview with Kevin Huizenga. http://www.du9.org/Kevin-Huizenga,1020 (accessed 30 August 2009).

28. Often, at least in American comics, the letterer is viewed more as an employee than as an artist in his or her own right. In recent years this perception has changed slightly; a few letterers, such as Todd Klein and Richard Starkings, have achieved superstar status.

text, Huizenga uses straight lines to indicate the order in which the components of a panel should be read, or to mark off a significant component of a panel. These lines, again, look just like the lines of the word balloons, panels and panel borders. The actual transformation of graphic and textual signs into each other is a recurrent feature in Huizenga's other work, if not necessarily in 'Jeepers Jacobs'. For example, in 'The Curse', Glenn and his family are driven crazy by the incessant singing of starlings. Huizenga represents the birds' song using word balloons containing stylized curvilinear squiggles, signs that are somewhere between ideograms and graphic representations of the sound of starlings singing. In 'Lost and Found', Glenn is obsessed with advertisements that show photos of missing children and their abductors. On the second page of the story he observes (or imagines) two people whose faces are surrounded by the frames used for the missing-children photos.[29] Such techniques have the effect of confusing all the many types of lines that typically make up a comics panel: the lines of the drawing proper, of the letters, of the word balloons, of the panel borders and so on.

In other words, in Huizenga's work all these lines exhibit the same *teneur en trace*, which, according to the Belgian comics theorist Philippe Marion, is the quality by which we recognize the *graphiateur*, the enunciative authority to which we can attribute all the components of a comics text.[30] For Marion, the idiosyncratic appearance of the line work in a comic alerts the reader to the presence of a singular, unitary enunciative subject which is responsible for that line. Lines can be placed on a spectrum according to their degree of *teneur en trace*, that is to say, the degree to which they reveal the unique psychology or at least the idiosyncratic physical movements of the *graphiateur*.[31] At one end of this spectrum is typographic lettering, which reveals little or nothing about the letterer/artist's psychology and serves as a transparent medium for the presentation of the meanings of the words. At the other end is calligraphic lettering, which foregrounds the specific

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29. Huizenga, *Curses*, p. 42.

30. *Teneur en trace* literally means 'tenor in trace', but note that in using the term 'trace', Marion gestures to the complex web of meanings this term has taken on in continental philosophy. Marion's book has not been translated into English. For an explanation and critique of his theories, see Jan Baetens, 'Revealing Traces: A New Theory of Graphic Enunciation', in R. Varnum and C. Gibbons (eds.), *The Language of Comics: Word and Image* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), pp. 145-55. Paul Atkinson's 'Movements within Movements: Following the Line in Animation and Comic Books' (*Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 4.3 [2009], pp. 265-81) also cites Marion's theory and discusses its potential applications to the study of animation.

31. For a detailed discussion of how the relationships between handwriting, physiology and movement have been historically conceived, see Tamara Plakins Thornton, *Handwriting: A Cultural History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

stylistic traits of the subject responsible for the letters, at the expense of their transparency and readability.[32] A similar taxonomy can be created to account for the actual drawings. Marion's analysis of the *graphiateur* draws heavily on psychoanalytic theories that are outside the scope of the present chapter, and he tends to treat this entity as a single person possessed of a unitary subjectivity. Another Belgian comics theorist, Jan Baetens, objects that this approach creates an excessive emphasis on biographical criticism and shortchanges those comics that are produced by multiple people.[33] Baetens's criticism is well taken, but does not refute the basic argument that at any given point in a comics narrative, both the 'visual' and the 'verbal' text can be ascribed to a single enunciative authority. Marion notes that this is the case even when a significant disconnect exists between the two elements:

> The lettering of comics tends to obey a *principle of homogeneity*: the manuscript trait corresponds in a more or less solidary manner to the drawn trait. Inasmuch as they conjugate themselves visually, they tend to produce upon the reader-spectator the same effect of trace (61; my translation, emphasis in original).

Simply by being juxtaposed visually, the drawings and the letters seem to be attributable to a single author-position, albeit one that is often schizophrenically split between two incompatible visual styles. In Huizenga's work, for example, the indistinguishableness of the lines that constitute the drawings, letters, word balloons, panel borders and so on reminds us that the same subject (a subject that we might conveniently label 'Kevin Huizenga') is responsible for all these lines. More important, however, this indistinguishableness demonstrates that all these lines have the same ontological status. They all proceed from a singular act of inscription. Moreover, no line is more privileged than any other as corresponding more mimetically to some extradiegetic reality. The line that represents Glenn Ganges's head is just as much of a graphic construction as the line of the word balloon that proceeds from that head, or the lines of the letters enclosed in that word balloon. All these types of lines are usually thought of as separate, distinct elements, but Huizenga reveals them all as mere fragments or modalities of a single Line whose apparent division into discrete parts cannot erase its fundamentally unitary nature. A line-drawn comic looks like a maze of lines with varying weight, which supposedly have varying ontological statuses in relation to the narrative world that the comic represents; and yet these lines are merely fragments of a single

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32. Philippe Marion, *Traces en cases: travail graphique, figuration narrative et participation du lecteur: essai sur la bande dessinée* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Academia, 1993), p. 79.

33. Jan Baetens, *Formes et politique de la bande dessinée* (Leuven: David Brown, 1998), pp. 40-41

line. Moreover, in an ontological sense, none of these lines has any inherently privileged or natural status: If all lines are originally the same, then hierarchical oppositions like true/false, natural/unnatural, or word/picture do not apply. In comics, every word is at least potentially picture and vice versa. In a more abstract sense this is also true of the figurative lines of a story's narrative and characterological progression. We might figuratively characterize the progression of a story, or the evolution of a character over the course of a story, as a line—as in the common phrases 'story line' and 'character arc', the first of which is invoked in the subtitle of Miller's book *Ariadne's Thread: Story Lines*. These lines are no less constructed and arbitrary than the lines of the words (and in a comic, the pictures) through which the story is told. As Miller notes in his discussion of the word 'character', there is a constant equivocation between multiple senses of the word:

> to name a visible mark already present 'naturally' on something as a distinguishing feature; to name a mark put on something by a human being to mark it, as a brand on a cow; to name a system of signs or an element in such a system ... to name the complex of invisible qualities the mark indicates, usually, though not always, human 'character' in the ordinary sense the word is used today.[34]

Characters in the last of these senses are also composites of characters in the first three senses, in that they are called into being by abstract signs or marks, without which they have no independent existence. Or to put it another way, a character is a collection of traits in two different senses:

> The novelist makes his particular configurations of character out of personality 'traits' that are already known to his readers. They are known not as the property of this or that real person, but as general components of character that may be possessed by many persons ... This might be compared to the way a complex Chinese character or Egyptian hieroglyph is made of the juxtaposition or superimposition of several traits that may appear in many other characters, but which make a unique configuration and a unique meaning in this particular assemblage.[35]

Note also that while the English word 'trait' means a feature by which something can be recognized, the French word 'trait' carries the additional meaning of a drawn line or mark.[36] In this figurative sense, Jeepers Jacobs, for example, is a collection of features that the reader identifies as typical of an American socially conservative evangelical Christian.[37] Yet he is also a col-

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34. Miller, *Ariadne's Thread*, p. 56.
35. Miller, *Ariadne's Thread*, p. 69.
36. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image* (trans. Jeff Fort; New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 139 n. 2.
37. This is not to say that Jeepers is a stereotype. Indeed, one review posted on a Christian-oriented website praises 'Jeepers Jacobs' as an honest and realistic portrayal of a Chris-

lection of drawn lines, and this is all the more literally true since he appears in a story that was produced by drawing lines on paper. Miller does not specifically discuss comics in *Ariadne's Thread*, but as we have seen, in comics produced by traditional methods, everything is a line. In comics, to a greater extent than in unillustrated prose fiction—which Miller spends most of his book discussing—the reader can actually see that everything, including the characters, consists of arbitrary lines.

So what implications does all this have for the presentation of apocalyptic imagery in comics? As we have already observed, when Jeepers begins writing his essay, he is convinced of the supremacy of the divine account of the apocalypse. The Bible tells what he considers an authoritative story of what will happen to unbelievers after the Last Judgment, and this, in turn, sets out a singular path that Jeepers must follow in his interactions with unbelievers. For Jeepers, the Bible is a collection of words or lines that have a unique, transcendental authority. In Huizenga's artwork, by contrast, no line is given authority over any other. Huizenga's words look like his pictures, and his pictures of 'real' things look like his pictures of 'imaginary' things. For example, Jeepers's imaginary versions of Paul Pals and Wayne Ganges (seen on p. 125) look just like the real versions of those characters, seen earlier in the story. There are no visual cues to indicate that the imaginary Paul and Wayne are in fact imaginary. The celestial golf course that Jeepers imagines at p. 122, panel 13, looks much like the real golf course Jeepers sees on TV at p. 123, panel 6. Similarly, images that come directly from the Bible look the same as images that come from less authoritative sources. The images of a column of smoke (p. 126) and a lake of fire (p. 127, panel 5) are illustrations of features of hell that the Bible explicitly mentions. The image of Glenn being manhandled by demons (p. 128, panel 2) comes from a poem by Isaac Watts, and the image of Glenn having his lungs seared by sulfurous flames (p. 128, panel 7) comes from a sermon by Charles Haddon Spurgeon. All of these images are colored in the same dark red tones, are drawn in the same style and make use of the same sweeping horizontal lines to represent smoke. The similarity between these images disproves Jeepers's claim that the first two images are qualitatively different from the last two. According to Jeepers, evangelicals should rely exclusively on the Bible's account of hell and should not invoke additional features of hell not mentioned in the Bible: '[A]s Scripture nowhere says that devils push the damned into a wide pit, Watts is guilty of some distortion. We should not go beyond where Scripture goes.'[38] Yet Huizenga makes no visual distinction between authoritative and counterfeit imagery

tian character (Seth T. Hahne, 'Our Holy Grail: An Honest Depiction of Christianity in Pop Culture', *Christ and Pop Culture*, accessed 30 August 2009. http://www.christandpop culture.com/literature/our-holy-grail-an-honest-depiction-of-christianity-in-pop-culture/).

38. Huizenga, *Curses*, p. 128.

of hell. His style erases such distinctions, putting the sacred language of the Bible on a par with the profane image of the cartoon, and revealing that the two are more similar than one might think.[39]

Finally, 'Jeepers Jacobs' suggests that when one tries to follow a story that one believes to be uniquely privileged, this merely results in hurt feelings. Jeepers and Glenn's second conversation, during which Jeepers tells Glenn his life story in lieu of telling him the good news, ends on a more positive note than their first conversation. Whereas the first conversation ends in an uneasy silence, at the end of the second conversation Glenn is comfortable enough with Jeepers to joke with him: 'Well, I'll be watching you today … now that I know you're a cheater … ha ha.'[40] If Jeepers had indeed told Glenn about hell, I imagine that Glenn would have been unwilling to listen and that the two men would have parted on a much less friendly note.

In conclusion, this story has much to tell us about how apocalyptic imagery can be transformed by the unique properties of the comics medium. In a text where everything is line-drawn, no account, however privileged, can retain its unique authority, because Huizenga never lets the reader forget that—in the words of another famous cartoonist, Robert Crumb—'it's just lines on paper, folks!'

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39. In what is certainly a bizarre coincidence if nothing else, the annihilationist theologian Edward William Fudge also makes this point. In his analysis of the images of hell used in the book of Revelation, Fudge claims, 'We may compare the code language of apocalyptic imagery to the stereotypes of modern cartoons' (Fudge and Peterson, *Two Views of Hell*, p. 72). He explains that a cartoon symbol, such as a light bulb over a person's head, can only be understood by a reader who is familiar with the symbol's meaning, and that the same is also true of the arcane symbols used in Revelation.

40. Huizenga, *Curses*, p. 134.

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2. Graphic Apocalypse and the Wizard of Grotesque: Basil Wolverton, the Worldwide Church of God and Prophecy

Emily Laycock

Basil Wolverton's (1909-1978) career in comics is largely associated with outrageous, 'crazily hideous' images.[1] His distinctive style of drawing, characterized by the depiction of stretched limbs, exaggerated facial features and 'verging-on-ridiculous'[2] physical anomalies, is often referred to as 'the spaghetti and meatball school of design'.[3] Nicknamed 'the wizard of grotesque', his images were often considered to be too shocking by the social standards of the period in which they were published and at times caused great controversy.[4] However, despite some dispute over the appropriateness of some of his images, he gained notoriety for his unique artistic style. Some of his best-known works include humor features *Powerhouse Pepper*, his seventeen science-fiction comics for Marvel, his one-off sketches for magazines *Life* and *Pageant* and, especially, his contributions to *Mad* magazine in the 1950s.

However, what is lesser known about Wolverton is that, from 1953 to 1974, he produced more than seven hundred biblical images for the Worldwide Church of God and its associated Ambassador College corporations. The church's founder, Herbert W. Armstrong (1892-1986), commissioned Wolverton to produce biblical images for the church's magazine booklets, *Plain Truth*, *Tomorrow's World* and *Prophecy*. Nearly all of the biblical images that he produced were, in 2009, collected together into one volume, *The Wolverton Bible*. Although Wolverton was proud to belong to the genre of comics

1. Grant Geissman, 'A Shot in the Liver, A Shot to the Soul' in *The Wolverton Bible. The Old Testament and the Book of Revelation through the Pen of Basil Wolverton* (ed. M. Wolverton; Singapore: Fantagraphic Books, 2009), p. 7.

2. Doug Harvey, 'The Closer You Look, the Prettier It Ain't: Basil Wolverton's Microscopic Grotesque' in Glen Bray (ed.), *The Original Art of Basil Wolverton: From the Collection of Glenn Bray* (San Francisco: Last Gasp Publications, n.d.), p. 15.

3. Geissman, 'A Shot in the Liver', p. 7.

4. Bray (ed.), *The Original Art of Basil Wolverton*, p. 6.

and grateful for his success, he had hoped that, ultimately, he would be 'best remembered for' his biblical images.[5]

In order to understand fully and appreciate Wolverton's work, it is necessary to map the ways in which his religious beliefs shaped his understanding of comics and vice versa; 'the threads of Wolverton's creativity and faith are inextricably woven.'[6] Wolverton was raised in a conservative Christian family, but while he was still in high school, he became disheartened with religion for many years due to his parent's separation and the sudden death of his sister.[7] However, when Wolverton came across Armstrong's evangelist radio programme *The World Tomorrow* in the late 1930s, his premillenialist[8] discourse and his 'newscaster-like speaking style, devoid of churchy language, both challenged and appealed to Wolverton'.[9] He contacted Armstrong in 1940, and they remained in close contact until Wolverton's death in 1978. Therefore, more specifically, in order to understand Wolverton's work, it is important to look at his relationship with Armstrong and how his theology influenced Wolverton.

Armstrongism

At the age of 18, Armstrong entered into the advertising industry in Chicago. He quickly established his own marketing business, which represented leading banks, industrial corporations and several other successful companies. However, Armstrong's career collapsed in the economic downturn of the 1920s, and he relocated to Portland, Oregon. In 1926, he re-established his business and was once again successful, before this second business also failed within the same year. Armstrong later came to believe that God was responsible for the loss of his career and claimed, 'God was taking away my advertising business.'[10]

The year 1926 represents a turning point in Armstrong's life. Although he was raised in the Quaker faith, he describes himself as having very little interest in religion and appears to have remained Christian but only in a

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5. Geissman, 'A Shot in the Liver', p. 7.

6. Wolverton, *The Wolverton Bible*, p. 11.

7. Wolverton, *The Wolverton Bible*, p. 11-12.

8. The belief in the Second Coming of Jesus, which will take place prior to Armageddon and the new millennial period. Premillenialist discourse portrays the future pessimistically, believing that the present world is experiencing evil times and that this evil is destined to worsen until Christ returns.

9. Wolverton, *The Wolverton Bible*, p. 12.

10. Herbert.W. Armstrong, *Mystery of the Ages: Did You Ever Ask Yourself: 'Who Am I? What Am I? Why Am I?' You Are a Mystery. The World about You is a Mystery. Now, You Can Understand!* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1985), p. 15.

noncommittal sense until the fall of 1926.[11] During this period, Armstrong's wife, Loma, started to observe the Saturday Sabbath after being introduced to Sabbatarianism[12] through neighbors.[13] Armstrong became frustrated with what he saw as his wife's 'fanaticism' of faith and was concerned that his business reputation could be damaged by his wife's new beliefs.[14] However, according to Armstrong, his wife challenged him to find evidence in the Bible that supports the Sunday Sabbath. He claims, 'there was no dodging this challenge. My marriage depended on it.'[15]

During this same period, Armstrong was confronted with a second 'humiliating challenge' from his sister-in-law, who, 'fresh out of college', argued that 'everybody who has any education *knows* human life has come by evolution'.[16] Armstrong, because of his Christian upbringing, was not fully convinced of the theory of evolution. These 'disturbing dual challenges'[17] posed to him by his wife and sister-in-law led him to a six-month period of intense study, where he focused particularly on the subject of mankind's origins and on the purpose of the Bible.[18] He also studied the works of Darwin, Haeckel, Spencer, Huxley, Chamberlain and Lyell,[19] among others, which he referred to as 'books on the other side of the question'.[20] Armstrong decided to research more deeply into the Bible and evolutionary theory in order to prove to his wife that the teachings of Sabbatarianism were wrong, and to his sister-in-law, that theories of evolution were not infallible. He described his aim as, 'I was determined to find absolute proof for the existence of God and of the authority of the Bible, or to reject both.'[21]

From his research he concluded that there was 'irrefutable PROOF of the existence of God the Creator' and 'proof positive of the fallacy of the evolutionary theory'.[22] Armstrong believed that the Bible contained all the answers 'to the paramount mysteries confronting all humanity'.[23] However, he claimed that the Bible was a 'coded' book and contained messages from God that were 'not

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11. Armstrong, *Mystery of the Ages*, p. 11.

12. The practice in Judaism and in certain Christian groups of strictly observing the Sabbath as a day of rest on the basis of Old Testament laws.

13. Michael.J. Feazell, *The Liberation of the Worldwide Church of God* (Grand Rapids, MI; Zondervan, 2001), p. 34.

14. Armstrong, *Mystery of the Ages*, p. 15.

15. Armstrong, *Mystery of the Ages*, p. 15.

16. Armstrong, *Mystery of the Ages*, p. 16.

17. Armstrong, *Mystery of the Ages*, p. 15.

18. Armstrong, *Mystery of the Ages*, p. 16.

19. Armstrong, *Mystery of the Ages*, p. 16.

20. Armstrong, *Mystery of the Ages*, p. 17.

21. Armstrong, *Mystery of the Ages*, p. xi.

22. Armstrong, *Mystery of the Ages*, p. 17.

23. Armstrong, *Mystery of the Ages*, p. xii.

allowed to be revealed and decoded' until the twentieth century.[24] It was at this point that Armstrong believed that God had purposely caused the failure of his advertising business and was now challenging him, through his wife and sister-in-law, to study the Bible in order to discover the 'truth' within it. His research led to his own conversion to Sabbatarianism. In 1927, he joined the Oregon Conference of the Church of God (a small Seventh-Day Sabbatarian group formed after the failed end-time prediction of William Miller in 1844), within which he was ordained as a minster in 1931.

It appears, however, that from 1926 to 1931 Armstrong developed the main tenets of his theology. Some of these (such as his support of British-Israelist ideas) disagreed with the Church of God's doctrines, which, in turn, led to his separation from the Sabbatarian community in the early 1930s. 'Armstrongism' combined aspects of traditional Christianity with Sabbatarian beliefs and prophetic messages, three areas that are reflective of Armstrong's own experiences of religion up until the 1930s.[25] The main thread to his theology was that he was God's appointed 'end-time apostle'.[26] God had granted him the position of the 'physical head of the Church under Christ',[27] and it was his duty to establish God's 'one and only true Church' on Earth.

Armstrong disapproved of many Christian symbols and practices, such as the image of the cross, the holidays of Easter and Christmas, and the worship of the Trinity, because of their association with paganism. He perceived traditional Christianity to be deliberately moving away from the 'true' teaching of Jesus; 'I had seen, with my own eyes, that the plain teaching of Christ, of Paul, of the Bible, were not the teachings of traditional "Christianity" ... I began to ask, where, then, is the real true Church which CHRIST founded?'[28] He also held strong views on the strict observance of the Old Testament meat laws and holy days, and did not approve of the following: participation in voting and in the military service,[29] women's makeup, interracial marriage, tobacco, and most forms of Western medicine.[30] However, the most important element of Armstrong's theology was his belief in British-Israelism and in the 'lost ten tribes of Israel'. This belief shaped his understanding of the apocalypse by influencing his ideas of who belonged to God's 'chosen' people.

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24. Armstrong, *Mystery of the Ages*, p. xiii.
25. Feazell, *The Liberation*, p. 35.
26. Feazell, *The Liberation*, p. 74.
27. Feazell, *The Liberation*, p. 74.
28. Herbert.W. Armstrong, *Autobiography of Herbert W. Armstrong* (Pasadena, CA: Worldwide Church of God, 1986), p. 351.
29. Feazell, *The Liberation*, p. 38.
30. Feazell, *The Liberation*, p. 36.

In 1933, Armstrong was given the opportunity to partake in a regular discussion group hosted by a small Christian radio station (KORE). Armstrong frequently debated issues in Christianity alongside other local ministers, and he gained instant popularity among listeners. His success led to the creation of his show entitled the *Radio Church of God,* which aired on the first Sunday in January 1934. His show played an essential role in the church's evangelism. He began to preach about the imminence of the 'Great Tribulation' spoken of in the book of Revelation and used his radio show to discuss numerous social anxieties of the time, such as the threat of war in Europe. Then as the Second World War took place, he made connections between the rise of Nazism and British-Israelist ideas surrounding the end-time prophecies of Ezekiel.[31] From this it is clear that even during the early days of the church's formation, Armstrong was making strong visual connections between the looming threats of social disaster and the prophecies spoken of in the Bible.

As his following grew, 'Radio Church of God' became the name of his ministry, to reflect the fact that he was 'pasturing his flock over the airwaves'.[32] In addition to his radio show, the first issue of *Plain Truth* magazine (Armstrong's first church publication) was published on 1 February 1934. *Plain Truth* announced several of Armstrong's end-time predictions. His first prediction was in February 1934, in which he claimed that the period of 'Great Tribulation' had already been in effect for three years. He made a second prediction in August 1939, where he claimed that the Second World War would end with Christ's return. These predictions were discussed in detail in *Plain Truth* and then by Armstrong on his show.

Elder Wolverton

Armstrong's church continued to rise in popularity and gain members throughout the 1930s and 1940s. As previously mentioned, Wolverton's introduction to Armstrong came through listening to Armstrong's radio show in the late 1930s, then called *The World Tomorrow*. Wolverton was baptized into the church in 1941 and ordained as an Elder in 1943. This was at the same time in which Wolverton's career was working on several different noteworthy comics such as *Powerhouse Pepper* and *Culture Corner*.

The year 1946 marked an important event in both Wolverton's comic career and in the church's development. In this year, Wolverton entered a contest to draw 'Lena the Hyena'. Lena was a character mentioned in Al Capp's popular daily strip *Li'l Abner* but had not been previously drawn because she

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31. Feazell, *The Liberation*, p. 35.
32. Feazell, *The Liberation*, p. 35.

was described as too hideous to depict. Wolverton's entry won, and, as a result, 'nearly twenty years of professional cartooning were transformed into overnight success'.[33] His work was mounted on billboards throughout the country and featured in numerous popular magazines, including *Life* and *Pageant*.

Wolverton had reached a peak in his career, becoming a well-known cartoonist, in the same year that Armstrong relocated his church's headquarters from Eugene to Pasadena, California. This meant that *The World Tomorrow* would now be broadcast more widely. In Pasadena, Armstrong established the church's educational college, Ambassador College, which was founded in 1947. Wolverton's status in the church at this time is evident from a church document, *1946 Articles of Incorporation of Radio Church of God*. This document outlines the 'purpose, business and pursuit' of the Radio Church of God and cites the main objective as 'to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ according to the Word of God to the people of the United States and the British Commonwealth'.[34] It is signed by the church's six 'Directors'. Wolverton's name is listed as second to Armstrong's and is the only Elder listed. The other directors are Deacons, David T. Henion and James A. Gott; Secretary, Esther M. Olson; and Treasurer, Loma D. Armstrong.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the church continued to expand its media output. By the end of the 1960s there was a vast array of church publications, and *The World Tomorrow* was being broadcast to five continents. Armstrong and his followers 'became increasingly convinced of his special calling',[35] and, in 1968, the decision was made to change the church's name to the 'Worldwide Church of God' in support of the view that 'he [Armstrong] alone was commissioned to preach the gospel in all the world'.[36]

The Bible Story

Beginning in July 1950 and continuing throughout the 1950s, Armstrong and Wolverton exchanged letters, which talked about the possibility of rendering Bible stories using the medium of sequential art.[37] Armstrong recognized that biblical stories in an easy-to-read comic-book style would greatly enhance his church's magazine publications.[38] He commissioned Wolverton on two main projects. First, he asked him to produce a series of images detailing the book

33. Harvey, 'The Closer You Look', p. 19.
34. Radio Church of God, *1946 Articles of Incorporation of Radio Church of God* (church document dated 3 March 1946).
35. Feazell, *The Liberation*, p. 35.
36. Feazell, *The Liberation*, p. 35.
37. Wolverton, *The Wolverton Bible*, p. 13.
38. Wolverton, *The Wolverton Bible*, p. 13.

of Revelation. These images were then split between the church's various publications, with the majority appearing in *Plain Truth*, *1975 in Prophecy* and *The Book of Revelation Unveiled at Last*.[39] The second project was to create *The Bible Story*, a series of illustrations and text that told the story of the Old Testament. The first sample of *The Bible Story* was printed in *Plain Truth* in 1958 and featured within every issue, until Wolverton's final chapter was printed in December 1969.[40] *The Bible story* was serialized into six volumes in 1961 and constitutes the first six chapters of *The Wolverton Bible*.[41]

It was also during the 1950s that Wolverton began to produce his most memorable work for *Mad* magazine, as well as his numerous successful horror and science fiction stories for Marvel. Two of his best-known science fiction works are *The Eye of Doom* (a tale about a spaceship returning to Earth from Venus which brings back a giant hypnotic eye that kills humans), and *Nightmare's World* (a story about a man who uses chemicals to explore his subconscious only to find that he becomes trapped in his own imaginative world). In his work, Ray Zone notes that it was during this period that Wolverton perfected his artistic style.[42] However, due to the publication of Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*[43] in 1954 and its damaging affect on the comics industry, Wolverton had to discontinue his horror and science fiction work.[44] What is clear, though, is that Wolverton's interest in the genre and his ability to create dark and disturbing science-fiction imagery greatly influenced his style of biblical artwork; and this is perhaps one of the reasons why Armstrong was keen to have Wolverton, rather than any other artist, work for his church.

While Wolverton's science-fiction work received a positive response from critics and the comics industry, he received negative feedback from many parents, who claimed his images were too violent.[45] His biblical images received similar criticism. However, Wolverton explained his intentions for his graphic

39. Wolverton, *The Wolverton Bible*, p. 13.

40. Wolverton, *The Wolverton Bible*, p. 13.

41. Wolverton, *The Wolverton Bible*, p. 13.

42. Ray Zone, 'Boltbreak: The Art of Basil Wolverton', *Journal of Popular Culture* 21.3 (1987), p. 151.

43. Psychiatrist Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* argued that comics (particularly superhero, crime and horror comics) had a harmful impact on youth. He claimed that such comics were too violent, gory, and included either explicit or hidden sexual content. His views were supported by many parents, which led to a Senate investigation of the comics industry and to the development of the Comics Code Authority (CCA) in 1954. The CCA was developed by publishers to censor comics of violent or sexual themes and required that all comics published should meet the Code's regulations. Therefore the impact of Wertham's book ultimately ended the golden age of the comics industry.

44. Zone, 'Boltbreak', p. 151.

45. Zone, 'Boltbreak', p. 151.

Bible as follows: 'There is a definite story thread in the Bible, though to some readers it seems frayed and broken. I try to tie it solidly together, at the same time making it easier to understand, especially to youngsters.'[46] He observed how children's Bible story books of the 1950s left out the more violent stories of the Old Testament. However, Wolverton believed that it was essential to teach and to accept these more violent aspects of the Bible in order to fully understand it.[47] He also argued that children interpret images of terror differently from adults and that children often engage with frightening stories as opposed to being scared by them.[48] In this sense, Wolverton was one of the first writers to encourage the idea of using comics to turn the Bible into a more readable text for young people.[49]

Wolverton explained that he struggled to depict accurately scenes from the Bible. He comments, 'This is more difficult to do than humor. It requires research and study. The illustrations are not easy for me because of the struggle to prevent them from being too cartoony.'[50] His style of drawing is characterized by the thick, bold outlines of his characters, which are detailed with little lines and crosshatching.[51] The thicker lines depict the dominant shapes and features of his characters, while the smaller lines are what gives his characters their substance by adding the detail needed to create more three-dimensional images.[52] This technique also emphasizes the uniqueness of each of his characters, as each figure has a noticeably different design than the rest of his images. In regard to his religious work, Wolverton's biblical images are heavily detailed in order to capture the intricacies of biblical narrative in the character's facial expressions, the backgrounds and the landscape.

Graphic Apocalypse

Wolverton's apocalyptic images constitute the seventh chapter of *The Wolverton Bible*, titled 'The Apocalypse and Beyond'. The striking imagery Wolverton used to depict the apocalypse provides an intimate reflection of the seriousness of his own belief in the apocalypse. The horror shown on peoples' faces and the backgrounds of the images create powerful but frightening scenes of the end of the world. In Wolverton's images, the division between those who

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46. Geissman, 'A Shot in the Liver', p. 9.
47. Wolverton, *The Wolverton Bible*, p. 14.
48. Wolverton, *The Wolverton Bible*, p. 14.
49. Wolverton, *The Wolverton Bible*, p. 14.
50. Geissman, 'A Shot in the Liver', p. 9.
51. Monte Wolverton, 'Basil in Amsterdam', in *The Original Art of Basil Wolverton*, p. 12.
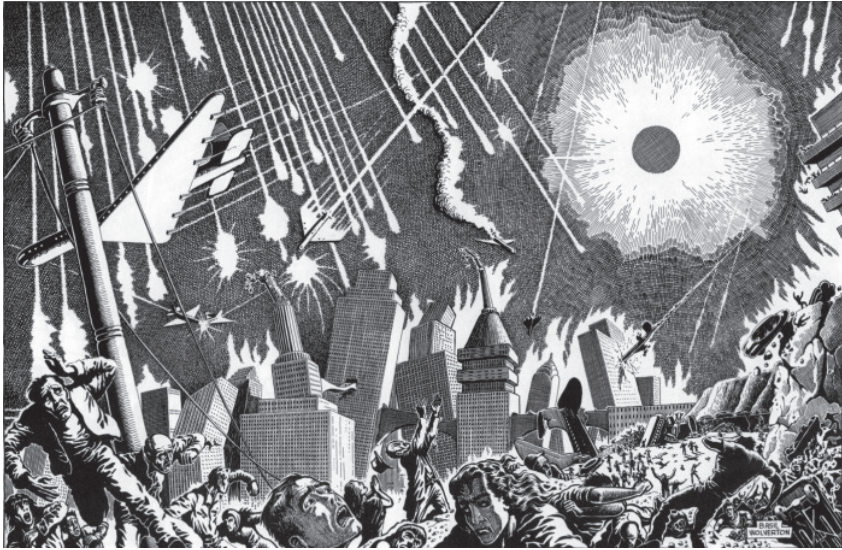52. Wolverton, 'Basil in Amsterdam', p. 12.

Figure 1. *Meteor Shower with Eclipse.* Wolverton's depiction of Rev. 6.12-14 (*The Wolverton Bible*, 2009, p. 272).

will be saved and those who are 'damned' is clear. His images, like Revelation, focus more on emphasizing the outcome of the damned over the favored.

However, what is interesting about his images is that when depicting Revelation, Wolverton does not depict popular symbols such as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, angels, the Beast, or any representation of John as the prophet who received the message of Revelation. Instead, he depicts the collapse of modern-style buildings, hailstones, fire, volcanoes erupting and planes crashing (see Figure 1). While these images do depict some of the events mentioned in Revelation, Wolverton appears to have taken out the supernatural symbols of the text in order to focus the narrative of apocalypse on the finality of this world and on human punishment.

At first glance, his images appear to depict a secular apocalypse, which focuses on the imminent global destruction of this planet through catastrophic ecological disasters. However, Wolverton deliberately intended his images to appear more secular with the hope that his text 'would be read by secular types as well as religious'.[53] This is because he believed that Bible was, above all, a 'story of humanity'.[54] The emphasis on humanity is evident in that a number of close-up faces dominate nearly all of his images and many of these faces express anguish and pain. *The Bible Story* was renamed *The Story*

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53. Wolverton, *The Wolverton Bible*, p. 13.
54. Wolverton, *The Wolverton Bible*, p. 12.

Figure 2. *Mutants.* Wolverton's depiction of what the aftermath of a nuclear war would look like (*The Wolverton Bible*, 2009, p. 284).

of Man in the 1970s to reflect the idea that the Bible was ultimately a story about humanity's relationship with God.

It is important to note that because Wolverton was creating these images for the Worldwide Church of God, his images were both informed by Armstrong's theology as well as developed under the supervision of Armstrong. His theology informed Wolverton that the Bible was full of 'conflict, pathos, tragedy, violence, bloodshed and horror'.[55] Therefore, the dramatic end-of-the-world imagery that Wolverton produced is indicative of Armstrong's belief that the world should be perceived pessimistically. It also helps to explain why Wolverton felt that it was essential for his biblical work to include the more frightening and violent stories of the Bible.

This influence of Armstrong is evident from the church's overseeing and editing of Wolverton's images. For example, an image illustrating Gen. 32.24, which portrays Jacob's physical struggle with a heavenly messenger, depicts only the figure of Jacob. This is because Armstrong believed that the heavenly messenger was Jesus, and Jesus should not be depicted in any form.[56] A series of pictures of animals (including a bull, a sheep, fish and various birds)

55. Wolverton, *The Wolverton Bible*, p. 12.
56. Wolverton, *The Wolverton Bible*, p. 60.

demonstrates the church's observance of Old Testament meat laws.[57] Again, Armstrong's opinion of Catholicism is evident in one image which depicts two men about to chop down a large wooden sculpture. The sculpture is gesturing the traditional papal sign of blessing.[58] The image's depiction of the two men about to destroy the sculpture reflects Armstrong's negative attitude toward church icons which originated within paganism.[59]

Moreover, some of Wolverton's images were never published, because the church's editors deemed several images as unsuitable for readers.[60] One image that was not included in the original publications was 'Mutants' (see Figure 2), a depiction of disfigured, hunched-back people, with blinded eyes. 'Mutants' is not an interpretation of a biblical passage but reflects Wolverton's perception of what the aftermath of a nuclear war might look like.[61] This image is demonstrative of how his apocalyptic imagery was influenced by his previous work in science-fiction comics.

Zone observes how the theme of nuclear war was the focus of many of Wolverton's science-fiction comics and suggests that these comics reflect the social fears of nuclear war that were prevalent in the 1950s.[62] However, the theme of nuclear war can also be seen in Wolverton's biblical images. For example, 'Hydrogen Bomb over the City' is Wolverton's interpretation of Rev. 6.4 and renders the destruction caused by the Horseman of 'War'. This association of the apocalypse with atomic disaster could also be representative of the end-time prediction made by Armstrong in the 1950s, when he preached that there were only ten to fifteen years left before Christ's return.[63] Armstrong had said that the world had entered into the period of the 'Great Tribulation' in 1931. After his failed prediction about Christ's return at the end of the Second World War, he claimed that the early 1970s would mark the final return of Jesus.

Wolverton's biblical images also contain examples that reflect Armstrong's use of apocalyptic dualism. The depiction of beauty is often used in the Bible to distinguish those who are righteous from those who are 'damned'. For example, visual contrasts are made in Revelation, where the beauty of the angels is contrasted with the images of beasts as figures of monstrous distortions. These visions help to 'particularize sin'.[64] They associate good with

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57. Wolverton, *The Wolverton Bible*, p. 82.
58. Wolverton, *The Wolverton Bible*, p. 216.
59. Wolverton, *The Wolverton Bible*, p. 216.
60. Wolverton, *The Wolverton Bible*, p. 264.
61. Wolverton, *The Wolverton Bible*, p. 285.
62. Zone, 'Boltbreak', p. 148.
63. Feazell, *The Liberation*, p. 89.
64. R.F. Reid, 'Apocalypticism and Typology: Rhetorical Dimensions of a Symbolic Reality', *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 69.3 (1983), p. 236.

beauty and visually link those who will be 'saved' with the divine figures of justice and righteousness.[65] Wolverton depicts all the righteous men in the Bible—with the exception of Adam, Cain, Abraham, Noah and Jacob—as clean-shaven, whereas those men whom the Bible refers to as 'sinners' (for example, men surrounding the area of the Tower of Babel) are depicted with beards.[66]

Out of all of Wolverton's biblical images, these visual connections are most evident in his apocalyptic images and, particularly, in his interpretation of Revelation. Images such as 'River of Blood', 'Boils and Darkness' and 'Famine' show the human form of those who are unsaved deteriorate into a mutated and grotesque, alien-like entity. This highlights how the presence of evil in apocalyptic stories encourages the readership to perceive the world in dualistic terms.[67] R.F. Reid notes how dualism helps to focus the readership's attention on being against something rather than in support of something, and by doing so, 'apocalyptic rhetoric does more than legitimize a cause, it also builds strong, sometimes fanatical, feeling of commitment'.[68]

Armstrong's authority over Wolverton's work and his position as an authority on the apocalypse are clear. Armstrong prophesied that after the return of Christ there would be a one-thousand-year period of peace, before the final destruction of evil and the establishment of a 'New Jerusalem' on earth. He declared himself to be the 'Elijah to come', a final prophet sent by God to '"restore all things", including right doctrine, in preparation for the return of Christ'.[69] This allowed him to justify his use of mass media for his prophetic speculation. He also repeatedly used his publications to emphasize his 'chosen' status. For example, he comments, 'I wanted to be an advertising man, but God brought me by circumstances not by my choosing to the mission he had in store for me.'[70]

Wolverton was asked by Armstrong to produce a graphic adaptation of the Bible that stayed true to the wording of the passages. However, he was asked only to depict the Old Testament and the book of Revelation. The Gospels of the New Testament were never drawn because Armstrong interpreted the second commandment as being strictly against the depiction of Jesus.[71] The decision not to focus on the New Testament could be related to Armstrong's interest in British-Israelism. Through the use of images, Armstrong could emphasize the connections between the forthcoming apocalypse, the deep

65. Reid, 'Apocalypticism', p. 236.
66. Wolverton, *The Wolverton Bible*, p. 60.
67. Reid, 'Apocalypticism', p. 238.
68. Reid, 'Apocalypticism', p. 241.
69. Feazell, *The Liberation*, p. 38.
70. Armstrong, *Mystery of the Ages*, p. 11.
71. Wolverton, *The Wolverton Bible*, p. 15.

connection to the land and tribes of Israel and to God's covenant with the Jewish people. This would make it clear to Armstrong's followers that the events of the future are directly connected to the past events spoken of in the Bible.

In his work *Arguing the Apocalypse*, Stephen D. O'Leary discusses the requirements for someone wanting to establish himself as a 'prophet' of the apocalypse. Among these are the need to gain a following through the use of charisma. This is necessary, O'Leary notes, because 'the authority of the apocalyptic narrative is grounded in the prophet's claim to direct apprehension of the sacred'.[72] This demonstrates the connection between the prophetic and the apocalyptic vision. The prophet convinces followers that they have 'secret' insight into the future. Therefore, the rhetor claims sole authority because only they can fully understand and interpret the message that they received and pass on this information to others. This relates to Armstrong's assertion that the Bible is a 'coded' text, which implies that only certain 'gifted' people have the ability to access the 'truth' of the Bible.

O'Leary also demonstrates how, throughout history, rhetors of the apocalypse have established their authority through their selection of certain religious texts.[73] Selecting some texts, for example Revelation, and rejecting others in effect validates the rhetor's own apocalyptic discourse by placing it in relation to other authoritative religious texts. The idea of placing texts into a hierarchical structure strengthens the authority of the rhetor among their followers, as they are seen to have special knowledge of the texts that should be considered as more divine than others. Therefore, Armstrong's decision to depict only the Old Testament and Revelation should be understood in light of this idea of using textual selectivity to help establish the authority of his own theological discourse.

Concluding Comments

The Worldwide Church of God remains as an evangelical Christian denomination, and its headquarters still reside in California. However, in 2009, the church changed its name to Grace Communion International, following huge reforms that took place in the church after the death of Armstrong in 1986. Tensions and concerns over Armstrong's theology arose within the church during the 1970s and 1980s. This was caused by various scandals associated with church ministers (including Armstrong's son, Garner Ted) and largely because of Armstrong's multiple failed end-time prophecies. After his death, the accuracy of Armstrong's interpretation of biblical

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72. Stephen D. O'Leary, S.D., *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 53.

73. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse,* p. 57.

passages and many of his doctrinal teachings were questioned by church members. Many of his beliefs, including the observance of the Sabbath, have now been abandoned by the church. M.J. Feazell notes that among church members today there are differing opinions about Armstrong. He suggests, however, that while the church acknowledges the positive teachings of Armstrong, the overall consensus on Armstrong today is that 'he was not what he claimed to be'.[74]

D. Harvey opines, 'Armstrong's appeal to Wolverton may have been formal in part: the church leader's doctrinal views were almost as visionary and idiosyncratic as Wolverton's drawings, and were arrived at through an obsessively detailed examination of scripture.'[75] This view highlights that there were various similarities in the characters of both men, which provides a further possible explanation for the unique relationship that emerged between them. The working style of both Armstrong and Wolverton has repeatedly been described as 'intense' and to some extent 'obsessive'. Both men also had a keen interest in technology and were equally technologically minded. For example, while still a teenager, Wolverton built several crystal radio sets and wired his parent's house for electricity.[76] Finally, both men were influenced by the major historical events that took place in America in the twentieth century, such as the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and fears in the 1950s over the possibility of nuclear war.

Most important, the relationship between Armstrong and Wolverton demonstrates the persuasive appeal of apocalyptic discourse and the way in which an apocalyptic rhetor interacts with people through engaging the individual's personal worldview. For Wolverton, the loss of his sister, which then led to his loss of faith in mainstream Christianity, might have produced feelings of anxiety or of social crisis, and such feelings could make a person more susceptible to apocalyptic rhetoric. As Ted Daniels argues, 'It is during darker periods of social crisis that prophets begin to appear, like stars emerging from the dusk.'[77]

It has been mentioned that Wolverton 'was not equipped to see the problematic aspects of Armstrong's theology and worldview'.[78] However, what is clear is that Wolverton, who had become detached from religion, found personal solace in the apocalyptic worldview of the Worldwide Church of God. His work for the church gave him the opportunity to explore his faith

74. Feazell, *The Liberation*, p. 97.

75. Harvey, 'The Closer You Look', p. 21

76. Monte Wolverton, 'Culture Corner', in G. Groth and K. Thompson, *The Culture Corner* (Singapore: Fantagraphic Books, 2010), ix.

77. Ted Daniels, *A Doomsday Reader: Prophets, Predictions and Hucksters of Salvation* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), p. 11.

78. Wolverton, *The Wolverton Bible*, p. 12.

through his art, and, as a result, he produced 'some of the most powerfully visceral apocalyptic art—sacred or otherwise—ever put down on paper'.[79]

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79. Geissman, 'A Shot in the Liver', p. 9.

3. THE WORLD OF THE END AS WE KNOW IT: ALAN MOORE'S DECONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF APOCALYPTIC CONCEPTS IN *PROMETHEA*

Diana Green

In *Promethea*, writer Alan Moore has created a singular graphic epic. Moore, a writer celebrated for his genre-redefining superhero, horror, mystery and erotic comics, draws on his studies as a self-proclaimed mystic to create *Promethea*, a work that uses aspects of a significant number of spiritual and theological traditions to create a story of the apocalypse and its surprisingly idyllic aftermath.[1] In so doing, Moore both honors and refutes the apocalypse of Revelation, and by extension, Christianity itself.

To examine *Promethea*, clarity concerning the nature of the work being discussed is necessary. In this narrative, Moore takes a superheroine on a literal journey through all major faiths, including Christianity. To examine the Christian precepts explored in this text, it will be necessary to explore the core ideas Moore mines in *Promethea*, as well as those in some of Moore's earlier works.

In the superhero realm, Moore has explored two primary interrelated ideas. Both relate to plausible outcomes of the superhero existing in the real world. The first such outcome, presented in *Watchmen*, is the superhero being hunted to extinction.[2] The second possibility—alluded to in *Watchmen* and brought to fruition in *Miracleman*—is that the superhero becomes a benevolent near-deity and creates an enforced utopia.[3] Like the reform Jewish notion of the messiah as a concept rather than an individual, this notion is a superhero version of the idea of heaven on Earth. The distinction is that in the Earthly superhero heaven (the *Miracleman* world), participation is mandated, while presumably such participation would be voluntary in a Judaic messianic utopia. In the concept of the messianic utopia, some (not all) Reform Jews hold the belief that the messiah is not an individual, but a

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1. Alan Moore, writer; Mick Gray, J. H. Williams III, and Jose Villarubia, artists, *Promethea, Books 1-5* (New York: DC Comics, 1999-2005).

2. Alan Moore, writer; Dave Gibbons, illustrator, *Watchmen* (New York: DC Comics, 1986, 1987).

3. Alan Moore, writer; John Totleben, illustrator, *Miracleman Book 3: Olympus* (Forestville, CA: Eclipse Comics, 1991).

time in which enlightened individuals will create a utopian world. In general terms, this is characterized by the following entry in an online encyclopedia of Judaica.

> Today, the various Jewish denominations have sharp disagreements about the nature of the Messiah and the Messianic Age, with some groups holding that the Messiah will be a person and other groups holding that the Messiah is a representation of the Messianic Age itself.[4]

Moore's most significant recent superhero creation, *Promethea*, is more than a standard superhero (if there is such a thing). She is the embodiment of a story, a *living* story that captures her creators and possesses and remakes their bodies, much in the same mystic manner in which Billy Batson becomes Captain Marvel by saying a 'magic word' to accomplish her goals.[5] Moore uses *Promethea* to expand his exploration/deconstruction of the superhero. In his vision, the heroine's stated ultimate purpose is the initiation of an apocalypse, that is, Moore creates in *Promethea* a heroine whose primary mission is the destruction of the world in order to remake it into something better. In other words, she is the personification of imagination. she is an idea brought to life, and she is the apocalypse.

In setting down this path, Moore takes the current incarnation of *Promethea*, Sophie Bangs, on a journey through the Tarot deck. The journey becomes an exploration of commonalities between different faiths, and the hero meets diverse beings, ranging from the blasphemous magician of the 1930s, Alistair Crowley, to Jesus Christ on the cross.

This journey is a physical one, but occurs on a spiritual plane, which Moore refers to as the *Immateria*. Based on the word 'immaterial', this is a reference to the part of life that lies outside or supersedes the physical. As such, Moore is manipulating our acceptance of our own realities. This manipulation is reaffirmed by the catalytic nature of Promethea's existence. To clarify, her creation and re-creation are catalytic events, which are events that create changes through the intervention of an outside element (in this case, an act of creativity, that is, writing or drawing), but leave the inciting element (in this case, the creator) unaffected. She comes into being only when someone creates her. An act of creation, in this context, refers to writing or drawing a narrative about the character, as opposed to deistic creation. Promethea

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4. *What Is Jewish Messiah?* http://encycl.opentopia.com/term/Jewish_Messiah. In *The Jewish Utopia* (Baltimore, MD: Lord Baltimore Press, 1932), Dr Michael Higger offers the following elaboration on the vision of a messianic utopia: 'An ideal society among the family of nations, as visualized by the prophets, although not realized as yet, will ultimately be achieved' (pp. 4-6).

5. Bill Parker, writer; C.C. Beck, illustrator, *Introducing Captain Marvel: Whiz Comics No. 3* (New York: Fawcett Comics, 1940), pp. 1-3.

comes to life through the body of the artist and/or writer, having been created by that individual.

Promethea's abilities are primarily supernatural/magical, however, which implies that *her* creator grants her such powers. This is problematic, to say the least. In a DVD interview, Moore has stated that the story is a metaphor for the theological or spiritual world. In the same interview, Moore stated that God, or, more accurately, our perception of God, is a creation of Man, who has in turn lost control of that creation.[6] The metaphor encapsulates both *Frankenstein* (subtitled *The Modern Prometheus*) and (in my estimation) Moore's interpretation of the biblical book of Genesis. This is consistent with Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's view, as interpreted by Henri de Lubac:

> His [Teilhard de Chardin's] aim is to win the admission that 'in the final reckoning, above Man's rediscovered grandeur, above the newly discovered grandeur of Humanity, there appears—not doing violence to but preserving the integrity of science—in our universe seen through the most modern eyes, the face of God'.[7]

Promethea is the revision of this idea. In Moore's narrative, she takes on one aspect of Godhood by forcing an apocalypse. She forces a new way of seeing on the world (more specifically, on the people of the world. The physical world itself, presumably reformed by her actions, seems oblivious to those actions). Her apocalypse comes in the realization that all functional aspects of the human world are a byproduct of human imagination, and that humans have the capacity to control everything by extension. While this could be perceived as blasphemous in that it puts Man ahead of God, it can also be seen as consistent with Scripture. In Genesis, God speaks as follows of knowledge:

> And the Lord God said, behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil. And now lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat and live forever: therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken (Gen. 3.22-23).[8]

Moore's narrative echoes this passage. In Moore's vision, a being created of a God, humanity, has the potential to deify itself, but only through knowledge of morality augmented by knowledge of the nature of existence. The banishing from Eden can be seen either as a chastisement or as fear of humanity's impending Godhood—'the man is become as one of us' (Gen. 3.22).

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6. Dez Vylenz, director, *The Mindscape of Alan Moore* (London: Shadowsnake Films, 2008).

7. Henri de Lubac, S.J., *Teilhard de Chardin: The Man and his Meaning* (New York: New American Library 1967), p. 118.

8. All biblical passages taken from the KJV unless otherwise specified.

I infer from this that Moore synthesizes the concepts of de Chardin with the above interpretation of the Genesis passage to offer a God created by humanity, one who in turn wants to offer humanity the dispensation to change its perception of itself.

And that dispensation is apocalyptic.

While there are arguably as many interpretations of the apocalypse of Revelation as there are biblical scholars, in my view, the general popular (that is, mainstream) perception seems to be that specific events will happen in response to others, culminating in an Armageddon. This has been manifest in interpretations in popular culture for decades. The most recent of these in the mainstream are the *Left Behind* films and books.

However, an apocalypse is not necessarily an Armageddon. The Oxford dictionary derives the term apocalypse from the Greek *apokalyptein*, which means 'uncover or reveal'.[9] While commonly associated with destruction on the scale of Armageddon, a formal definition based on the root words leads to the notion that there is an apocalyptic, or revelatory, aspect to seeing truth. So in a formal sense, Moore's work reflects that classic meaning of this elusive term.

Promethea follows her exploration of the *Immateria* with a return to the 'real world' of the narrative. She summarily begins her final mission, the destruction of the world. At this point, the work takes on tenuous analogies to Scripture. These are tenuous in that Moore is playing fast and loose with a number of spiritual traditions, and the Christian apocalypse is but one of these traditions. However, the following analogies to Christian precepts and teachings on the apocalypse are noted. First, Promethea refers to herself as 'the Final Fire'. This echoes Rev. 19.18: 'By these three was the third part of men killed, by the fire, and by the smoke, and by the brimstone which issued out of their mouths.' Second, the dead return and living people are able to speak with them. While their words are largely comforting, their presence creates dread in some they encounter. This is a reflection of Rev. 20.12: 'And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God.' Third, the image of Promethea is seen in the skies kissing a goat. The goat echoes the satyr, a Greek mythological figure devoted to carnality. Since Promethea is an idea, this is another representation of the intersection of material and immaterial, of the carnal and the spiritual. This is also a reference to the biblical beast and alludes to Rev. 17.3: 'I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet colored beast.' Finally, as the apocalyptic event nears fruition, a glowing, smiling image of Promethea, wearing a crown of stars, fills the heavens. This echoes Rev. 12.1: 'and there appeared a great wonder in Heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head twelve stars.' However,

9. *New Oxford American Dictionary*, s.v. Available online, 3rd edn, 2006.

this image also invokes the intersection of Christianity and current perceptions of pagan faiths that predate it. This invocation is necessary to make the point. As de Chardin observes,

> Then, as St. Paul tells us, '*God shall be in all.*' This is indeed a superior form of pantheism, without trace of the poison of adulteration or annihilation: steeped in which each element will teach its consummation at the same time as the universe.[10]

Following the apocalyptic event, the reader is invited to join Promethea at a hearth. During this chat, Promethea explains to us individually (as we read individually, after all) that she is quite aware she is a story, thank you very much, and that this makes her all the more real, since all human achievement comes from imagination. What she has given us, she tells us, is the knowledge that our world of isolation is ended. 'Know that our universe is all one place, a single firelit room, all time a single moment ... Rejoice. Your world is ended ... return now to your separate selves and separate rooms, and know that separation for illusion.'[11] This echoes the thoughts of de Chardin on the 'noosphere' (defined as a postulated sphere or stage of evolutionary development dominated by consciousness, the mind, and interpersonal relationships, literally a place made of shared ideas and consciousness[12]):

> This essentially convergent movement will attain such intensity and such quality that mankind, taken as a whole, will be obliged—as happened to the individual forces of instinct—to reflect upon itself at a single point; that is to say, in this case, to abandon its organo-planetary foothold so as to shift its centre onto the transcendent nature of its increasing concentration. This will be the end and the fulfillment of the spirit of the earth... The end of the world: critical point simultaneously of emergence and emersion, of maturation and escape.[13]

What de Chardin envisions as a post-apocalyptic scenario is quite similar to the possibility put forth by Moore in *Promethea*. The central idea in both hypotheses is that humanity will achieve a gestalt consciousness, be able to both commune with and understand the mind of God, and survive the experience, understanding its own place in the Divine. This in turn echoes Julian Huxley's concept that

> humanity in general, and religious humanity in particular, has for so long been habituated into thinking mainly in terms of an external, personal, supernatural or spiritual being, that it will indubitably be difficult to aban-

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10. De Lubac, *Teilhard de Chardin*, p. 171.
11. Moore, *Promethea*, Book 5, pp. 130-31.
12. De Lubac, *Teilhard de Chardin*, p. 90.
13. De Lubac, *Teihard de Chardin*, p. 90.

don this view and see God ... as a creation of the human soul ... the two
organized into a single whole by the organizing power of the human mind.[14]

This is also consistent with at least some current scientific thought on the
nature of the universe. Physicist Paul Davies speculates on teleology, the idea
that the universe is created by consensus out of a need perceived by its own
sentience in its own future.

> Teleology [the doctrine of design and purpose in the material world] is by
> definition a means to anticipate some future state (in this case, life) and
> bring that state about in the fullness of time ... Crazy though the idea may
> seem at first, there is in fact no fundamental impediment to a mechanism
> that allows later events to influence earlier events. In fact, there are some
> famous theories of physics that explicitly involve backwards causation—
> future events having causative power over past events.[15]

Carried a step further, if the world is created by consensus, might it not be
destroyed by the same mechanism? Davies further states,

> The laws of physics and the states of matter in this universe have the spe-
> cial property that they permit physical systems (brains, genes, computers)
> to construct an internal representation of the world—that is, to perform
> virtual reality computations that mirror the external universe. In short, they
> embody knowledge about the world.[16]

This is relevant in that it reflects another facet of Moore's beliefs on exist-
ence, and its beginnings and endings. Moore sees science as congruous with
magic and faith, and cites Einstein and other scientific minds alongside the
spiritual texts in *Promethea*'s final chapter, which is an essay in comics form,
offering sources and options for further study.[17]

It's a bit odd for Alan Moore to be considered a Christian writer in any
context. His writings refer directly to pantheism, Kabbalah, Hindu philoso-
phies, and, arguably most discordant with traditional Christianity, magic.

His daughter Leah described the occasion of Moore's fortieth birthday.

> At his fortieth birthday party he declared himself a magician. He wasn't, of
> course. He couldn't even do balloon animals ... It was only when I recovered
> from that really long fit of giggles that I realized he was serious. He was get-
> ting into ritual magic, learning about the Kabbalah and filling his house
> with occult paraphernalia.[18]

14. Julian Huxley, *Religion without Revelation* (New York: Mentor Books, 1958), p. 24.
15. Paul Davies, *The Cosmic Jackpot* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 2007), pp. 240, 242.
16. Davies, *The Cosmic Jackpot*, p. 233.
17. Moore, *Promethea, Book 5*, pp. 173, 174, 180.
18. George Khoury, *The Extraordinary Works of Alan Moore* (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2003), p. 7.

As such, Moore's reverence for Christianity in this complex and arcane text is surprising. Yet I contend that the story is rooted in Christianity. This is to some extent a necessity to accommodate the culture in which the story is created. In order to tell a story of the end of the world in a predominantly Christian society, or one perceived as such, it's necessary to recognize that society's beliefs on the matter.

At first blush, this story seems biased against the Christian ethos. Promethea is a young girl whose gods-worshipping father is killed by fearful early Christians, c. 500 CE. Alone in the desert, she is approached by gods that predate Christianity. These gods are not specifically named in the text, but resemble the Egyptian god Horus and the Roman god Mercury, complete with caduceus[19]. They offer her a place among them as a living story. After she accepts, her story is retold and she comes to life in the telling. Given this origin and Moore's bent for pantheism and mysticism in this book (and in his personal life), it is easy to infer a lack of respect for Christian mores. This inference can be further drawn when it becomes clear that the goal of *Promethea* is the apocalypse.

However, during Chapter 17 of her journeys into the worlds of magic and pantheism (and ideally into wisdom, or at least Moore's perception of wisdom), Promethea and her allies encounter gods from a gamut of faiths. As they are discussing concepts of the sacred and the profane, one of them utters the words 'Jesus Christ'.

And there he is. Not as symbol or metaphor, but Christ on the cross. The reality of the event overwhelms them. This leads them to a different understanding, a deeper wisdom. As one of them says,

> Our highest point. The best in us. The gold. And it's nailed writing on the cross of the world ... but even down here, at the lowest Auschwitz ass-end of what humans are and what humans do, our highest point is still with us. There's light. Always remember that. There's light at the bottom.[20]

This passage helps clarify Moore's intent regarding Christianity and the Christian apocalypse. While he hardly takes Christianity as the one true faith or even a preferred one, if such exists in Moore's world of mages (practicing magicians), he does recognize its power for destruction (Promethea's origin) and for redemption (the apocalypse as cleansing act). He recognizes the potential for forgiveness in Christianity, and attempts to extend that forgiveness through the apocalypse itself. He allows the forgiveness implicit in the crucifixion to carry through the apocalypse, and redeem humanity from that for which it does not forgive itself.

19. Annalisa DiLiddo, *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), p. 90.
20. Moore, *Promethea,* Book 3, pp. 127-30.

The place in Christian history that this is most clear is in the teachings of the Gnostics. Christian historian David Chidester speaks of the four stages of Gnostic myth, developed in its heyday, c. 140 CE. This myth presages many aspects of the *Promethea* narrative. The stages are as follows:

> First, a purely spiritual realm, emanating from the highest God, was popu-lated by divine beings of wisdom and power. All together, the supreme God and the divine beings constituted the perfection, fullness and entirety of the spirit. Second, the material world was created by mistake, by some unex-plained accident ... the accident included the creation of human beings, the material world was essentially imperfect. Third, by the mercy of one or more of the divine beings, a spark of light was placed in some of the human beings ... these human beings ... carried the divine spark of light that origi-nated from the spiritual realm. Fourth, and finally, in order to awaken those who were spiritually asleep, a redeemer came from the spiritual realm to reveal the knowledge—the *gnosis*—that would remind those who responded to return home.[21]

Chidester's explanation of the precepts of the Gnostics echoes the *Promethea* narrative. The flawed beings accidentally cast here are the men who hunted the original Promethea's father. The 'mistake' of the physical world, in Moore's interpretation, is that we fail to see our complicity in its creation. The 'divine beings' are the elder gods who allow her to live on as a story.

And the Gnostic awakening is Promethea's instigation of the apocalypse.

Although its validity as a Christian sect is debated, in part due to its reluc-tance to observe Christian ceremony, Gnosticism offers another link, how-ever tenuous, between different interpretations of Christianity and Moore's text.[22] It begs the question, however, whether the casting of early Christians as the villains who killed Promethea's father is a reflection on the faith itself.[23] It seems more likely that it is a reflection of the time, place and societal mores in which the narrative begins, namely, 411 CE in Alexandria, than it is of the faith itself.

Ultimately, the text and subtext of *Promethea* are both a reinforcement and a repudiation of the apocalypse of Revelation. Moore alludes to this: 'Triumphs, heartbreaks, Heaven, Hell. Paradise everlasting. Endless punish-ment ... This, then, is Revelation. All is one and all is Deity ... Rejoice. Your world is ended.'[24] I infer from this that Moore sees humanity as constantly destroying and re-creating all of existence. In *Promethea*, Moore expresses the apocalypse as a vehicle through which a benevolent deity allows humanity to

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21. David Chidester, *Christianity: A Global History* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins Books, 2000), p. 50.

22. Chidester, *Christianity*, pp. 51-54.

23. Moore, *Promethea*, Book 1, p. 9.

24. Moore, *Promethea*, Book 5, p. 156-157.

see not its place *in* the universe, but its place *as* the universe. The following dialogue from the penultimate issue of *Promethea* sums up Moore's vision of the apocalypse.

> 'And that's the world ends, huh?'
> 'What do you mean?'
> 'I mean, like, it doesn't end with a bang, right? Or a whimper. It ends with "hey, yeah. I get it."'[25]

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25. Moore, *Promethea,* Book 5, p. 166.

4. (Ir)reverence after Rapture: Mocking and Maintaining Christian Doctrine in *Battle Pope*, *Chronicles of Wormwood* and *Therefore, Repent!*

A. David Lewis

> 'Wait — ... I totally get it. Jesus kicks the Devil's *ass*!'
> 'But it's still disrespectful!'
>
> *Hamlet 2*

In his *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1794), William Blake famously describes *Paradise Lost*'s John Milton as 'a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it'.[1] Blake's comment partially arises from Milton's depiction of Satan as being too sympathetic, too nuanced and too human; God, meanwhile, was remote, opaque and alien. Though Satan, spying on Adam and Eve, says he sees 'In them Divine resemblance' (IV.354), he contends they will be shunned by God as he was.[2] Humanity, though favored, are his brethren: 'To you whom I could pittie thus forlorne / Though I unpittied: League with you I seek' (374-75). In his noble pursuit to 'justify the ways of God to men' (I.26), Milton may have, albeit inadvertently, strayed into the diabolic to convey his message of faith in God.

All of this is to say: a devout message may still be communicated through less-than-reverential means. Rather, it can be accomplished by altogether sacrilegious works. Take, for instance, Robert Kirkman and Tony Moore's series *Battle Pope*, in which one finds sexual promiscuity, obscene language, vulgar depictions of both Jesus and Mary and an apostatic papacy. But, putting all that aside, it delivers a demonically devout account of God's divine plan for humanity after the Rapture.

Kirkman and Moore's *Battle Pope, Volume One* is the sort of story that its introduction writer Benito Cereno (the pseudonym of comics writer Jamie

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1. William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (New York: Dover, 1994), plate 6.
2. All quotations from Milton are taken from *Paradise Lost* (New York: Penguin, 2003).

Groover) feels the virtuous may find literally demonic. It is, he says, the sort of work that could enflame an 'anger ... that the creators might have anticipated: the lofty, righteous indignation of a devout patron of the denomination', namely Catholicism, 'whose cultural centers were the quarry of this iconoclastic periodical's sharp nettle sting'.[3] In his own introduction to *Volume Two*'s original printing, comics publisher Larry Young describes the series as a 'story of a whisky-addled, meat-eating blasphemous sinner finding himself Pope of a post-Apocalyptic Earth'.[4] Pope Oswald Leopold II was not among those called by God to heaven at the time of the Rapture, likely due to his raging—and often-satisfied—libido, his quick-trigger violence and his lack of sincere faith in his institution: 'Screw the Church', he says, 'Who *really* believes in this shit anymore, anyway?'[5] Oswald is not anyone's model Catholic, and his status as pope can easily be taken as an insult to the office.

Yet, Kirkman and Moore seem to recognize precisely that, making the errant Pope Oswald's remainder on a post-Rapture Earth no oversight. That is, who could disagree that a man wallowing in this magnitude of sin deserves to be blocked entry to God's kingdom? 'I wasn't the most *Christian* Pope', he admits. 'I did whatever the *Hell* I wanted ... and I had a *Hell* of a time *doing* it! *No one* messed with *me*. I was the *Pope* fer *Christ's* sake! Life was good. Until *He* came ... and *ruined* everything.'[6] Oswald knows he is undeserving, and his place is among the unworthy during the demon-infested tribulation. 'From the outset', says Matthew Diebler, 'Pope is set up as a bad Christian, one without the proper religiosity ... [this] lack of religiosity comes in his un-Christianlike behavior. After meeting God and being granted an irrevocable pass to heaven, Pope's behaviors become even more un-Christian: his sexual activity increases dramatically, and his cursing, smoking, and drinking all remain a key part to his characterization.'[7]

Further dueling with Kirkman and Moore's surface heresy are the roles of God and Jesus in this post-apocalyptic setting. Again, *Battle Pope* invites outrage at their depictions. That is, God is given the stereotypical white-man-with-flowing-ivory-beard visage, a lack of omniscience, and a decidedly

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3. Robert Kirkman *et al.*, *Battle Pope: Volume One, Genesis* (Berkeley, CA: Image, 2006), p. i.

4. Larry Young, 'Introduction,' in *Battle Pope: Mayhem* (Lexington, KY: Funk-O-Tron), pp. iii-iv.

5. Robert Kirkman *et al.*, *Battle Pope: Volume Three, Pillow Talk* (Berkeley, CA: Image, 2007), p. 9.

6. Kirkman *et al.*, *Battle Pope: Volume One*, pp. 4-5.

7. Matthew Diebler, 'God or Pussy?: Image's *Battle Pope* and the Superhero Genre's Tension Between Masculinity and Christian Religious Ideals' (paper presented at the Popular Culture/American Culture Association Conference; Boston, MA, 2007), n.p.

vernacular vocabulary—e.g. 'Ahem! What am I, chopped liver?'[8] Moreover, he has no confidence in Jesus, shown to be a nose-picking, Hawaiian-shirt clad simpleton; to save Saint Michael from imprisonment by Lucifer, God says, 'I wanted to send my son, but lord knows he's incapable'.[9] These are neither flattering nor reverential illustrations of either God or Jesus. But, even in being unorthodox, are they heretical?

The characterizations of Jesus and God echo that of Pope Oswald: their behavioral traits—their humanizing details—seem scandalous, but their greater roles and capacities remain consistently Catholic and grand if one can see through to them. Jesus' insulting simplicity, lack of hygiene and general ineptitude can be offset by his devotion to God, his incorruptibility, his loyalty to Pope Oswald, his capacity for forgiveness and his desire to help humankind. This *Battle Pope* Jesus is just as upset that Christmas commercialism has supplanted the importance of his birth as he is that it may prevent humanity from becoming closer to God. 'Would you rather have toys instead of a chance to go to heaven?! Is that what it's all about? Toys?!!'[10] And, unlike a Warner Sallman sterilized, beatific, spiritual Christ, this Jesus both knows and thrills over material things (e.g., Nintendo, lollypops, coffee, hugs) yet puts salvation first.

Similarly, the *Battle Pope* God is informal, heckling, and perhaps even sexual; the Virgin Mary, with her pornstar-like dimensions, suggests all men carnally pale in comparison to the Lord (see Figure 1). This God, though, also assures Oswald that He has not 'abandoned them, that is not the case. I sent them a guardian', namely Saint Michael, 'to watch over the few good people left'.[11] With Saint Michael captured, though, God has empowered Oswald to

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8. Kirkman *et al.*, *Battle Pope: Volume One*, p. 19.

9. Kirkman *et al.*, *Battle Pope: Volume One*, p. 20. In his 2007 Popular Culture/American Culture Association conference paper, Matthew Diebler suggests a further reading of Jesus' depiction—not just as an innocent but as 'an incompetent representation of feminized masculinity'. He says, 'Jesus is introduced in the first issue, being depicted as having long hair and a beard, a crown of thorns, very short and tight cut-off jeans, an open flowered Hawaiian shirt, a tee-shirt sporting the phrase "What Would I Do?," and flip-flops. Throughout the first eight issues, Jesus is shown to be highly incompetent, functioning mainly as comic relief: he screams, he cowers, he hides behind Pope, he cracks jokes, he gets beat up, and he can't function in a fight. His arms are tiny and his body is stringy; he wears baby-blue (or sometimes purple) one piece pajamas with a flap on the butt that won't stay closed. He cries when he's yelled at and crawls into bed with his partner when he can't sleep (much to Pope's ire in the morning when his sexuality is questioned by a visiting lady-friend who finds them in bed together). Jesus is constructed as a feminized man; in strict gender binary terms, Jesus represents the passive to Pope's active, the lack to Pope's phallic.'

10. Kirkman *et al.*, *Battle Pope: Volume Three*, p. 71.

11. Kirkman *et al.*, *Battle Pope: Volume One*, pp. 19-20.

Figure 1

fulfill that role (see Figure 2) and have a chance at personal redemption. In short, God is crass but fair and protective. And the pope is fallen but faithful. Though Diebler feels Oswald 'reflects the opposite actions associated with such religious faith as it is seen outside of the comic', one could instead detect spiritual development in his character.[12] In fact, after Oswald (aka Battle Pope) defeats Lucifer, he further demonstrates himself to be a changed man by opting to remain on Earth and fight demons rather than ascend to heaven. While his behavior remains relatively constant, those still working for post-tribulation access to God's kingdom largely consider him 'the driving force of the new law'.[13]

God and the pope fare far better in *Battle Pope* than in Garth Ennis and Jacen Burrows's *Chronicles of Wormwood*, a series that actively challenges both the reader's stance on tribulation and one's ability to find the divine in the profane. As with Kirkman and Moore, Ennis and Burrows operate with a modern/perverted expression of a New Testament society actively fulfilled:

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12. Diebler, 'God or Pussy?' n.p..
13. Kirkman *et al.*, *Battle Pope: Volume One*, p. 30.

Figure 2

God exists as a near-mindless onanist; Jesus lives again yet suffers from a debilitating head injury; and—much like Oswald—this pope is a sex-obsessed Australian conspiring with Satan to trigger the apocalypse.[14] One player left

14. This is not to say that a modern envisioning of New Testament prophecy has, by necessity, to be perverse. Rather, this is the special touch of Garth Ennis, fusing the two together, as he also did in the *Preacher* series. In his defense, Ennis might argue that he

untouched by Kirkman and Moore is the Antichrist—here, a thirty-something British TV producer named Danny Wormwood—who, in Ennis and Burrows's vision, attempts to live his life as mundanely as possible. That is, save having a beer with his addled friend Jesus, he wants nothing to do with the divine plan. 'I guess that's the reason Jay [Jesus] and I are such good friends', he concludes. 'We both told our dads to fuck off.'[15]

Despite their recognition of and parts in all this, Wormwood, Jesus, and even the Whore of Babylon attempt to live in denial of their reality, one that physically includes the seven-headed scarlet beast of Rev. 17.3:

> *Wormwood*: I always thought it was just a metaphor. The heads and the horns are kinds, the earthly rulers who cause the battle of Armageddon. To tell the truth, I never really believed it all...

> *Babs*: I know what you mean. But look: You, me, Jay [Jesus], we've always assumed that just because the way the Bible represents *us* is bullshit, then the rest of it must be too.[16]

Wormwood accepts the supernatural and the divine—his own limited powers are 'magic, sorcery, eldritch power. Whatever'—while simultaneously dismissing much of organized religion, its authority and its supremacy.[17] He says, 'The Bible's a book that men wrote, like the Koran, or *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.* It's just guesswork, with some stuff churches and kings threw in to frighten peasants.'[18] Yet, when Satan comes to cajole Wormwood into helping him, his most compelling argument is that scriptural prophecy is already coming into being. Burrows's illustrations show scenes of Asian children in sweatshops and of African child soldiers to support Satan's point, but they also highlight the particular conflict between the United States and radical Islam; the remainder of the page shows President George W. Bush in aviator gear under a 'Mission Accomplished' sign, Osama Bin Laden recording a new *fatwah*, an aircraft flying into the second World Trade Center Tower, Private Lynndie England posing for a photograph with a nude and bag-headed prisoner at Abu-Ghraib prison, and an armed, bearded man leering at two

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is not entirely adding this unsavoriness but, instead, revealing what is below the surface of institutionalized religion's history and theology. 'Wormwood is dogged from the very beginning by the machinations of the Catholic Church; it really doesn't get more organized than those guys. I know that far-right evangelist groups get a lot of attention nowadays, but if you look at history you'll see that the Vatican did it all first and on a much grander scale' (Wickline 2006).

15. G. Ennis, (writer) and J. Burrows (artist), *Chronicles of Wormwood* (Rantoul, IL: Avatar Press, 2007), p. 14.

16. Ennis and Burrows, *Chronicles of Wormwood,* p. 94.

17. Ennis and Burrows, *Chronicles of Wormwood,* p. 11.

18. Ennis and Burrows, *Chronicles of Wormwood,* p. 57.

hijab-covered women.[19] The message of the scene seems to be that this 'clash of civilizations' is as much proof to a reluctant Wormwood as the seven-headed beast that his father's predictions are coming true.

How is a reader to take this message, particularly if he or she does believe in a literal interpretation of the Revelation of John? That is to say, Satan here is as much a believer as is the pope and, later, God, while the Antichrist is not—on whose side does one really want to be? Wormwood, along with Jesus, is stuck between acknowledging the manifested truths of the Bible and embracing its underlying moral messages. Said another way, Wormwood and Jesus are actively preventing the Rapture by means of passive resistance; if the pope, Satan, and even God agree that the two sons are in error by doing so, on what moral authority can they continue to do so?

Reviewers of *Chronicles of Wormwood* have responded to this surprisingly deep philosophical dilemma, especially within such an intentionally sensationalistic series, in a number of ways. Most manage to recover from all the spectacle and blasphemy to find a surprisingly strong core to the comic, one that still manages to find religious principles even after discarding God and Satan. Tim Janson of *Comic World News* admits, 'I'm not deeply religious but I have to admit to being a little shocked and offended by some of the scenes in *Chronicles of Wormwood*. But after reading through the entire graphic novel, that eventually subsided.'[20] On the blog *Holy Heroes!*, Gabriel McKee elaborates, 'Though Ennis paints a truly ugly picture of God, he obviously has a great deal of affection for *Jesus*. The dual defeat of God and Satan at the book's conclusion is presented as a victory for humankind. Despite its intention to blasphemy, *Chronicles of Wormwood* ends up delivering a moral message that's almost … well … Christian.'[21]

By preventing the Rapture—by removing both God and Satan as motivators, authorities or excuses—Wormwood (and Ennis) make humankind

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19. Ennis and Burrows, *Chronicles of Wormwood*, pp. 36-37. For this author, the most troubling part of *Chronicles of Wormwood* isn't its supposed heresy, sacrilege, profanity, violence or sexual content. More alarming is the repeated anti-Islam message throughout. It would have been enough to affirm Jesus' divinity and make no mention of Muhammad to convey a Christian reality. However, this sequence, the previous comment on the Koran, and a later vignette of a Muslim suicide bomber condemned to caring for 72 crying, vomiting babies (i.e. virgins) pushes the point to an unnecessary degree. Though Wormwood comments that all sorts of people can go to heaven—'There are atheists here. Agnostics. Muslims and Hindus, Jews and Buddhists'—some of that disclaimer's sincerity seems questionable when he adds, 'There's even a Satanist or two' (57).

20. Tim Janson, 'Judgment Day—January 30, 2008' (ComicWorldNews.com; 30 January 2008; http://www.comicworldnews.com/cgi-bin/ index.cgi?column=judgmentday&page=22/).

21. Gabriel McKee, 'Chronicles of Wormwood #4, 5, and 6' (Holy Heroes!; 9 August 2007; http://holyheroes.blogspot. com/2007/08/chronicles-of-wormwood-4-5-and-6.html/).

responsible for itself. People must do things in their own names, not in God's and not in Jesus'. In fact, even Jesus himself is told to put his faith in humanity rather than vice versa:

> Of all the things I expected from this series, a moment of honest to goodness *Christology* wasn't on the list, and it's a pleasant surprise … In spite of everything, Wormwood ends up delivering a message of hope. He gives an inspiring speech to Jesus that concludes: 'You have to hope things'll get better. D'you know why? Because it's exactly the kind of hope in the face of **unimaginable** despair that you've always asked of everybody.'[22]

This hope comes neither from God's existence nor *in*existence; it comes from the belief in one's own divine attributes. Horror writer Maurice Broaddus finds this in his own review of *Chronicles of Wormwood*: '[A]ccept the truth of yourself. Recognize that you, too, are an eikon, an image-bearer of God; worthy of respect, value, and love. We participate in the Divine Being, meant to partake in the Divine Life and Happiness', even if one suspends his or her allegiance to that God. In short, 'just because you've removed God and the devil from equation of your life doesn't mean that the reality of the spiritual dimension, or its occasional intrusions, is also removed.'[23]

Battle Pope embraces a loosely pretribulation Rapture while ridiculing both the papacy and Jesus; *Chronicles of Wormwood* maintains basic Christian eschatology while discarding God, Satan and the imminence of the Rapture itself.[24] Artist Salgood Sam (aka Max Douglas) and writer Jim Munroe invert those approaches with the graphic novel *Therefore, Repent!* by delivering a Rapture without God, Satan or any affirmation of Christian cosmology. Ironically, *Therefore, Repent!* acts as the most reverent and civil of these three comics yet concludes, potentially, as the most radical.

The subtitle to *Therefore, Repent!*—itself a reference to Rev. 2.16, 'Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth'[25]—is *A Post-Rapture Graphic Novel*. That is, at its

22. McKee, 'Chronicles of Wormwood #4, 5, and 6'.

23. Maurice Broaddus, 'Chronicles of Wormwood—A Review' (*The Pontifications of Maurice Broaddus*, 17 March 2009; http://www.mauricebroaddus.com/2009/03/chron icles-of-wormwood-review/).

24. It is worth noting that another series, *Strange Girl,* created by Rick Remender and Eric Nguyen, moves in yet another direction: It accepts that God, Jesus, demons and the pretribulation Rapture are all quite real, but, by story's end, it has eliminated all of them and returned existence to a pre-Rapture state with all of them now gone. *Strange Girl* is both a reality with a Christian cosmology and then without it.

25. Though, given the fact that the opening page misquotes this line as coming from Revelations [plural], it may be prudent to mention that the title could also originate from Acts 8.21-22: '[Y]our heart is not right before God. Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you.'

outset, the Rapture is a given fact, having occurred several years prior to the story's opening. Literary critic Matthew Grubman sets the scene as follows:

> At the centre of the story are Raven and Mummy ... They have arrived in post-Rapture Chicago where magic works, 'Splitters' (those left behind but still have Faith in a second Rapture so they need to atone) irritate, and the capitalist system has deteriorated. Wearing disguises (Raven with a Raven head, Mummy dressed in bandages), they settle into a squat and life starts to unravel around them.[26]

That unraveling comes in the form of winged soldiers charged with eliminating those in 'violation of [their] charter with God', namely the usage of magic, voluntarily or involuntarily.[27] These angelic soldiers tell Mummy and Raven's community, 'You the fallen, forsaken by God, will only be suffered to live so long as you do not break this covenant.'[28] As post-tribulationist fiction, all this can be read in keeping with its Johannine title.

However, what was initially accepted as the fulfillment of Christian doctrine soon turns suspect. Many of those left behind start discovering their abilities to wield magic, whether or not they chose to practice or believe in it. What had originally been a costume for Raven becomes real; her bird mask, worn as a reminder 'to stand witness' to this changed world, turns into her actual face. Raven finds a growing group of similarly persecuted, accidental magic-users.[29] One relates, 'We'd all been able to do some kind of magic since the Rapture. And it'd left its mark on us ... I wasn't a believer in anything except the occasional Masonic conspiracy theory ... Didn't seem to matter if you believed in magic, it worked anyway.'[30] Likewise, Mummy's bandages are removed to reveal a third eye in the center of his forehead, the expression of his newfound enlightenment, a spiritual third eye. While they use these abilities to hold back the soldiers, Mummy awakens from a meditative state to suggest that the Rapture may have been a false one. He explains that these magic powers may be the result of some 'dampening field' being lifted on humanity: 'We had these abilities with us, all the time. [The field] stopped them. Then for some reason ... poof, it was gone! And we could do anything we wanted.'[31] The people who ascended did so of their own subconscious self-election, and, according to Mummy, suffocated once out of Earth's atmosphere (see Figure 3).

26. Matthew Grubman, "Therefore Repent!" (http://matthewgruman.com/therefore-repent/).

27. J. Munroe (writer) and S. Sam (artist), *Therefore, Repent! A Post-Rapture Graphic Novel* (San Diego: IDW, 2007), p. 78.

28. Munroe and Sam, *Therefore, Repent!*, p. 105.

29. Munroe and Sam, *Therefore, Repent!*, p. 53.

30. Munroe and Sam, *Therefore, Repent!*, p. 125.

31. Munroe and Sam, *Therefore, Repent!*, p. 152.

Figure 3

'This changes things', says Raven, and it is a profound understatement.[32] Now, the magic-users are no longer the fallen or the elect. They are now the norm, what humanity always had the supposed capacity to be. The angel-like soldiers are no longer agents of the divine but, instead, an invasion force.[33] When Raven questions Mummy's theory that the soldiers may, in fact, be extraterrestrials who have taken on the form of angels, he reasons, 'Adopting a powerful guise is kind of a no-brainer—it's not like we're secretive about our

32. Munroe and Sam, *Therefore, Repent!*, p. 153.
33. There is significant evidence in the story that the angels may have co-opted a number of humans who did not ascend during the Rapture but were nevertheless faithful. One soldier in particular, distinguished from the others by the Ace-of-Hearts card he wears on his helmet, has faint memories of a life before his time as a soldier. It may also be possible that he is a plant for Lilith, the *de facto* leader of the magic-wielding human forces which he eventually joins.

Figure 4

mythology. We've been broadcasting it for a century … Maybe I'm just pes-
simistic, but I think God could probably kick our asses a lot faster than these
jokers have.'[34] The fictional landscape that readers, along with the charac-
ters, had come to accept shifts beneath their proverbial feet. What had been
a literally and figuratively faithful account of tribulation after the Rapture
is sharply undercut by a new cosmological logic. Raven, still reeling from
Mummy's theory, says that disguised alien invasion sounds crazy—to which
Mummy deftly replies, 'Sounds less crazy than angels' (see Figure 4).

It is important to emphasize that, while Mummy's explanation for the
Rapture decouples it from being a Christian phenomenon, this does not
disprove nor delegitimize a/the apocalypse as a coming event. As Annalee
Newitz notes in her review of *Therefore, Repent!*, 'the message is never a simple
"Christianity is stupid" dogma at all. Instead, the point is to be careful about
what kind of paradise you wish for.'[35] Specifically, it is not a dedication to
Christian prophecy that proves to be the problem but, rather, a blind adher-
ence to it that both dooms the raptured and threatens to condemn those
left behind. In the story, a television broadcast of President George W. Bush

34. Munroe and Sam, *Therefore, Repent!*, p. 153.
35. Annalee Newitz, 'The Rapture Is Real, Angels Have Machine Guns, and Dogs
Can Talk' (io9.com, 21 May 2008; http://io9.com/392600/the-rapture-is-real-angels-have-
machine-guns-and-dogs-can-talk/).

shows him touring the country on his 'Good Word Tour' alongside Jesus Christ—or, rather, a man who looks a great deal like a popular Sallman painting of Jesus.[36] Mummy shouts at the television screen, 'You think that's Jesus? Jesus couldn't get into this country! He'd look more like al Qaeda than that poser!'[37] As appropriately skeptical as Mummy is about Bush's Jesus, others in the neighborhood are intrigued by a drifter with the ability to turn bottled water into wine.[38] In either case, people—readers and characters alike—are more taken by the appearance of things than any inherent significance to them. To paraphrase Mummy from earlier, they are beholden to their mythologies. The possibility of an alien invasion, however, is another powerful modern mythology that, if compelling enough, could cast a new blindness to the exclusion of God's existence within the story. Reviewer Sibin Mohan asks, 'What if the rapture went from being mythology to reality?'[39] Mummy's conclusion risks impulsively making it mythology again, one that has been dismissed in the wake of, essentially, a false alarm. *Therefore, Repent!* is not anti-Christian nor anti-Rapture; rather, it anti-false Rapture and, like *Chronicles of Wormwood*, pro-human potential.

Besides tweaking the nose of Christian doctrine while slyly exploring it, these three comics, perhaps by the nature of their medium, share an ambivalence toward endings. As stories taking place either *after* the End or thwarting such an End, they present something of a challenge to traditional Western story telling. In his book *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode suggests that all modern stories are end-directed, a result of Christianity and Revelation's influence. With judgment day no longer due momentarily, that sense of urgency and expectation has been turned inward; 'although for us the End has perhaps lost its naïve *imminence*, its shadow still lies on the crises of our fictions; we may speak of it as *immanent*.'[40] Human concern with the end of existence has been projected on to our fiction which, by nature of the codex, must end; as Kermode writes, this is 'one of the great charms of books'.[41] Therefore, the book is a 'paradigm of crisis', the realm in which readers and writers can play out this consuming concern for ending.[42]

36. Munroe and Sam, *Therefore, Repent!*, p. 35.

37. Munroe and Sam, *Therefore, Repent!*, p. 40.

38. Munroe and Sam, *Therefore, Repent!*, p. 83.

39. Sibin Mohan, 'Graphic Novel Review: *Therefore Repent* by Jim Munroe and Salgood Sam' (Blog Critics, 4 March 2008; http://blogcritics.org/books/article/graphic-novel-review-therefore-repent-by/).

40. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 6.

41. Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, p. 21.

42. Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, p. 16.

When denied an ending, how do readers respond? This has been a central question for post-structuralism and has made comic books a robust field for testing any hypotheses. Perhaps it is the sequential nature of comics panels and their original serial distribution—their issue-by-issue continuance—that has placed them into this useful post-structuralist position.[43] Like Umberto Eco's concern in 'The Myth of Superman', comics often have to provide (to steal Kermode's title) a sense of ending *without* ending.[44] They must provide some degree of closure, satisfying enough to the reader's internal (and perhaps unconscious) concept of story without losing the reader with a complete ending.

All three series mark either a return to or a new status quo in lieu of a full-stop conclusion. For *Battle Pope*, Oswald and Jesus will continue, *à la* the superhero genre, their never-ending battle against demonkind on behalf of humanity. For *Chronicles of Wormwood*, the Antichrist and Christ will continue to evade their supposed roles as apocalypse-bringers. And, for *Therefore, Repent!*, the magic-users uprising will continue, fighting off and perhaps discovering the origin of angel/alien hoards. Through impish eschatology, demonic devotion, and trickster theology, these comics of the post-, near-, and pseudo-apocalypses lure the readers not to tales of final endings but, instead, into yet another story of new beginnings.

> Every exit is an entrance to somewhere else.
> *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

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43. Comics, of course, are not entirely alone in this regard. Certainly, oral storytelling has had this feature to it, as do contemporary television dramas or movie franchises. However, with sequentiality being a virtual building block of comics and comic strips, it is more difficult to say that comics have the same option *not* to engage in such continuity, whereas movies and television shows can be 'one-off', stand-alone stories complete with ending.

44. See Umberto Eco, "The Myth of Superman," *Diacritics* 2 (1972), pp. 14-20.

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Part II

MAINSTREAM COMIC BOOKS
AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

5. Apocalypse Then and Now: *Kingdom Come* and the Tradition of Imagining Armageddon

Terry Ray Clark

In another recent essay I analyze the graphic novels *Kingdom Come* and *Watchmen*, addressing some of the ways that graphic novels might function as prophetic voices in our society.[1] In this essay, I examine in greater detail the form, content and rhetorical function of *Kingdom Come* to demonstrate how it uniquely adapts the ancient (Western) genre of the apocalypse in order to deliver a prophetic message relevant for modern society. Unlike many ancient Jewish and Christian apocalypses, which were designed to bolster faith in otherworldly salvation during times of this-worldly persecution, *Kingdom Come* subverts the hope for a transcendent rescue. Instead, it argues that forgiveness, self-sacrifice and personal responsibility have more practical value for helping humanity avoid self-annihilation in the modern age.

Apocalyptic Genre and Apocalyptic Rhetoric

Before analyzing the apocalyptic nature of *Kingdom Come*, it will be helpful to review the distinctive characteristics of the genre of apocalypse. Functionally speaking, apocalypses typically arise from situations of genuinely perceived distress and/or persecution, even if these merely reside in the imagination of the authors and their intended audience.[2] The apocalypse intends to pro-

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1. Cf. Terry Clark, 'Prophetic Voices in Graphic Novels: The "Comic and Tragic Vision" of Apocalyptic Rhetoric in *Kingdom Come* and *Watchmen*', in Philip Culbertson and Elaine M. Wainwright (eds.), *The Bible in/and Popular Culture: A Creative Encounter* (SBL Semeia Studies, 65; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), pp. 141-56. I borrow liberally here from my own prior work, duly noting references to other authors. For the graphic novels, cf. Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (New York: DC Comics, 1987, 1995), and Mark Waid and Alex Ross, *Kingdom Come* (New York: DC Comics, 1997).

2. John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Biblical Resource; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2nd edn, 1998), pp. 22, 38-42.

vide consolation and exhortation during a time of crisis, and has proved to be highly effective for this purpose.[3] It serves as a coping mechanism by promising that, however unfair current circumstances might appear, they will eventually be justly resolved at the end of the current age. Typically, the apocalypse promises that all adversaries of the faithful will be destroyed by direct, divine intervention. Therefore, believers may take comfort in knowing that although they face suffering, temptation and a sense of powerlessness in the present, those who endure faithfully will be rewarded in the time to come.

More specifically concerned with its characteristic form and content, John J. Collins defines the apocalypse as:

> revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.[4]

It is worth clarifying that the human who receives the revelation in the form of a vision relates it to the reader in the form of a first-person vision report, which makes up the bulk of the apocalypse, if not the entire narrative framework. This human is often pseudonymously treated as a famous figure from the distant past. For example, *1 Enoch*, written between the second century BCE and the first century CE, is attributed to the enigmatic figure Enoch, who is mentioned briefly in Gen. 5.18-24, and who, like the prophet Elijah (2 Kgs 2.11), may have passed on to the afterlife without first actually dying. This technique not only gives the text an autobiographical perspective, but lends an authority to the testimony contained therein on par with the respect already granted to the already famous (supposed) author.

Given these basic parameters, Collins separates ancient apocalypses into two major categories: the historical apocalypse and the otherworldly journey.[5] The former type involves a revelation through which the original recipient (i.e. prophet) of an otherworldly vision learns how the current, mundane world will be transcended by divine intervention at the end of time. The prophet receives a visionary 'sketch' of how the world will wind down.[6] The latter type of apocalypse involves a visionary experience whereby the prophet takes a tour of other realms of reality that lie beyond normal human perception (e.g., heaven, hell, the underworld). Here, the prophet receives confirma-

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3. Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, pp. 41-42.

4. John J. Collins, 'Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre', in John J. Collins (ed.), *Semeia 14: Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), pp. 1-19 (9) and Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, p. 5.

5. Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, pp. 6-7.

6. I borrow the term 'historical sketch' from Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 4th edn, 2008), p. 474.

tion that the 'otherworld' exists through the experience of actually traveling there. This experience clarifies the nature of the relationship between heavenly and earthly realities—heaven overshadows and will eventually supersede all earthly powers.

In classical versions of the genre, the prophet interacts dialogically with otherworldly realities in the midst of his vision, but primarily with his angelic tour guide, and for the purpose of clarifying the meaning of what the prophet is seeing in the vision. Normally, he is powerless to change the inevitable course of events that the divinely granted vision promises will unfold, and from the prophet's perspective, there is usually little reason for wanting to change them or delay their arrival.[7] This suggests that the prophet's will is already aligned with the will of heaven, even if the implied reader's is not. By way of contrast, as we will see in the graphic novel *Kingdom Come*, the attitude of heaven is difficult to discern, and the shape of the end does not appear to be set. The prophet—and by implication the ideal reader—is encouraged to adopt a perspective that refuses to accept that the future has a particular and inevitable End. Instead, prophet and audience are encouraged to decide their own fate, to initiate change that might subvert an impending disaster before it is too late. Here, the prophet's otherworldly journey is replaced by a miraculous tour of the length and breadth of the mundane realm, which enables him to become an agent of change in the narrative, rather than serve as merely a passive or submissive reporter of a predetermined destiny.

In both ancient types of apocalypse, a critical component is the 'discourse' or 'dialogue' between the prophet and a divine messenger, who appears in the vision to guide the prophet and the ideal reader to a proper interpretation of the vision's imagery.[8] The visionary experience normally contains both 'temporal and spatial dimension'.[9] The prophet travels across space and time, and through the elaborate narration of these events, so does the reader. These travels might allow the prophet to witness evidence of a 'definitive eschatological judgment' that will be, or already has been, initiated by a transcendent power.[10] For instance, one might witness the heavenly bliss or hellish torment of those former inhabitants of earth, who have already passed on. The overall effect is to suggest that, despite evidence to the contrary, the world of mundane reality is overshadowed, controlled and destined to be superseded by a transcendent power, which will right the wrongs of the past. Thus, historically speaking, the apocalypse exhibits a linear approach

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7. This will provide an important point of contrast with the plot of *Kingdom Come*, and also its deliberative rhetoric, which is designed to encourage the reader to respond actively to its message.

8. Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, p. 5.

9. Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, p. 6.

10. Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, pp. 8, 11.

to time, in which history will arrive at a final, consummating destination, and its authority resides in the fact that it consists of direct revelation from a world of superior domain and power.[11]

In the historical sketch, the apocalyptic prophet and his audience receive a kind of visual 'down payment' or preview of the future by which the fulfillment of divine promises is witnessed in advance of their actually coming to pass. In the visionary tour, the divine plan for the future is made even more palpable because, for a limited time, the prophet miraculously enters into the promised future, being allowed to see, hear, smell and/or feel otherworldly realities. This is especially helpful in making divine promises of justice more believable to those currently suffering oppression.

While these rhetorical techniques are all intended to convince the faithful that God can be counted on to bring his plan to fruition, responses may vary.[12] Critical for understanding the function of any apocalypse is to grasp that, by shaping the reader's 'imaginative perception of a situation', the text is able to 'exhort' any number of possible courses of action.[13] In other words, the genre may elicit either passive or active responses. Sometimes, believers assume an apathetic or passive orientation to the mundane realm, because it is destined to pass away or is considered irredeemable. If this is the case, the most appropriate course of action might be simply to maintain one's own individual purity until the appointed time. Worldly endeavors may seem futile and to be avoided, lest they sully the righteous and threaten their eternal salvation.

Alternatively, the apocalypse may inspire a reevaluation of one's religious credentials and a desire to attain a higher level of individual righteousness. Even if the overall fate of the mundane world is sealed, its imminent destruction may encourage either reclusive vigilance or active rescue. If the reader finds his resume for the final judgment lacking, he may modify his lifestyle accordingly. Similarly, out of concern for the fate of others, some will seek to rescue the perishing by means of evangelism or proselytism. If nothing else, apocalyptic urgency helps to increase the effectiveness of the text for establishing, invigorating and reinforcing a sense of identity and solidarity among a target audience that considers itself a holy remnant, sometimes in spite of (and sometimes because of) the fact that it usually holds a marginal status in the larger society.

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11. Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, p. 40, citing M.E. Stone, 'Apocalyptic Literature', in M.E. Stone (ed.), *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period* (CRINT, 2/2; Assen: Van Gorcum; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), pp. 383-441 (429).

12. For example, the tortures of divine punishment are vividly portrayed as having already begun for the damned in a number of ancient apocalypses (cf. the *Apocalypse of Paul* and the *Apocalypse of Peter*).

13. Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, p. 42.

Thus, the well-recognized tendency in apocalyptic toward radical dualism, a mindset in which mundane realities are considered less potent, less reliable and less valuable than supernatural ones, sometimes contributes to a decrease or lessening of 'human initiative' for preserving or redeeming the current world order.[14] This is often the case when the world's values are perceived as being in opposition to the apocalyptic individual's or the apocalyptic community's values. But apocalyptic's 'powerful rhetoric for denouncing the deficiencies of this world' will also demonstrate an 'appreciation of the great resource that lies in the human imagination to construct a symbolic world where the integrity of values can be maintained in the face of social and political powerlessness and even of the threat of death'.[15] By doing this, the apocalypse posits an invisible world of justice and order, in spite of appearances to the contrary, in which the adherent can place faith and hope.

One might argue that exercising the imagination apocalyptically is always a creative response to a perceived threat to one's safety and most deeply held values, and it should therefore always be understood as more active than passive. Its rhetorical purpose is often epideictic, meaning that it works toward the preservation and propagation of a pre-established identity and/or set of values, even as its perspective is spurred by an idealistic vision of how the broken world might one day be perfected (albeit through the intervention of an otherworldly force).[16] Alternatively, a more deliberative rhetoric is designed to encourage an audience to initiate some type of measurable action to change its circumstances.[17] Thus, one important aspect of understanding apocalyptic response is the orientation of the believer toward either a this-worldly optimism, which usually leads to more deliberative action, or a this-worldly pessimism, which usually leads to more epideictic responses to distress. In either case, the faithful long for significant change. The real difference lies in where one's faith and trust for a better tomorrow are placed. Is salvation to be found in a this-worldly or otherworldly context, in a this-worldly or otherworldly resource?

While pessimists work to rescue those individuals who may be converted to their cause, their focus is primarily on rescuing *from* the current world, which is destined to pass away. Optimists, on the other hand, believe in the goodness of this world, in its inherent value and the power of humanity to

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14. Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, p. 283.

15. Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, p. 283.

16. For a discussion of epideictic rhetoric, cf. Ch. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1971), p. 51.

17. On deliberative rhetoric, see Aristotle, *The 'Art' of Rhetoric* (trans. John Henry Freese; Loeb Classical Library, 22; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 1.3.1358b.

recreate the world around them. From one perspective, humanity's ability to change for the better is limited and temporary, merely forestalling the more permanent progress that only the *eschaton* (End) can bring. It looks forward to the world winding down to its inevitable conclusion. The other perspective sees human change as the *only* possibility for real progress.

Either approach may emphasize the role of messianic figures, special individuals who help to usher in redemption through their own heroic, self-sacrificial behavior. But a crucial question remains: Who will benefit from the messiah's endeavors? Will the entire world be saved from damnation, or only an elect or select group? While the question of universal or limited atonement is not definitively answered by *Kingdom Come*, it yearns for the redemption of all. However, it provides no easy solution to the question of whether the end may justify the means when the salvation of many is at stake. This last issue is especially important for understanding the appropriate exercise of power for ushering in an apocalypse's vision of a new world.

The dual-edged nature of apocalyptic pessimism and optimism is emphasized by Stephen D. O'Leary's *Arguing the Apocalypse*, a work that highlights the rhetorical aspects, rather than formal literary structures, of the genre. O'Leary is more focused on apocalyptic argumentation, which he understands as a form of deliberative rhetoric, which may inspire a range of responses. It is 'a social practice of "public, persuasive, constitutive, and socially constituted utterance"' that appears in a greater range of contexts than what some scholars might consider for a traditionally styled apocalypse.[18] As such, this rhetoric is not limited to one clearly defined generic structure, but rather is adaptable to a variety of forms, including such popular cultural products as film, music, television and even graphic novels.

While focusing more on apocalyptic rhetoric, themes and topics than on generic features, O'Leary still draws from the genre one of its most prominent characteristics: 'a particular type of eschatology' that 'reveals or makes manifest a vision of ultimate destiny, rendering immediate to human audiences the ultimate End of the cosmos'.[19] The goal of this eschatology is to establish and maintain a sense of communal identity and solidarity by 'develop[ing] foundational narratives that define the relationship of the social order to the perceived evils of the universe', and thereby engaging author and audience in mythmaking behavior. 'The story of the apocalyptic tradition is one of community building, in which human individuals and collectivities constitute their identities through shared mythic narratives that confront the problem

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18. Stephen D. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 4, citing Margaret D. Zulick, 'The Agon of Jeremiah: On the Dialogic Invention of Prophetic Ethos', *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 78 (1992), pp. 125-48 (126).

19. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, pp. 5-6.

of evil in time and history.'[20] By clearly identifying good and evil, and elaborating how the former will ultimately annihilate the latter, apocalyptic rhetoric strives to create a shared perception of a mutual threat, which is designed to create and maintain group identity and solidarity. In this way, the production of apocalyptic narratives plays an important religious and social role not unlike the production of other meta-narratives, whose ultimate purpose is to define and preserve communal identity.[21] Of course, what O'Leary fails to note here is that, ultimately, this kind of rhetoric serves an epideictic purpose, even if its formal style and structure are deliberative.

O'Leary finds that the most enduring appeal of apocalyptic lies in its versatility and effectiveness for dealing with the ongoing human struggle against three key challenges: time (which represents fluctuation or change), authority (which represents competition and sometimes abuse) and injustice.[22] These represent perennial problems for human existence, to which apocalyptic responds 'as a symbolic theodicy, a mythical and rhetorical solution . . . accomplished through [a] discursive construction of temporality'.[23] This means that various forms of apocalyptic discourse, much like the traditional genre, have the power to reframe or reinterpret the current chaos in the universe as temporary, and limited by a 'divinely predetermined' plan that will soon manifest itself as the final solution to all prevailing forms of evil.[24]

But as Ted Daniels points out in his 'Charters of Righteousness: Politics, Prophets, and the Drama of Conversion', the answer to the temporal problem of human finitude is not always a forward-looking abandonment of the past. Instead, it sometimes incorporates a form of 'cosmic recycling' in which the earth is imagined as eventually 'return[ing] to its original condition: paradise'.[25] In other words, visions of paradise that sometimes dominate our

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20. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, p. 6, building on the work of Earl G. Creps, *The Conspiracy Argument as Rhetorical Genre* (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1980).

21. However, it should be noted that challenges to social cohesion inevitably change over time, and as perceived threats change, so do the worldviews and the narratives that expound on them. Thus, as Conrad Ostwalt, *Secular Steeples: Popular Culture and the Religious Imagination* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), has recognized, the locus of authority for responding to such matters, as well as the medium of response, may also shift.

22. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, p. 16.

23. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, p. 14.

24. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, p. 16, building on the work of Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

25. Ted Daniels, 'Charters of Righteousness: Politics, Prophets and the Drama of Conversion', in Stephen D. O'Leary and Glen S. McGhee (eds.), *War in Heaven/Heaven on Earth: Theories of the Apocalyptic* (Millennialism and Society, 2; Oakville, CT: Equinox, 2005), pp. 3-17 (3).

romantic views of the past will be projected forward in the hope of helping humanity return to what is believed to have been originally lost or originally corrupted. 'Prophets and commentators refer to apocalypse as The End, but its focus ultimately is always on a new beginning, a sudden shift in the order of the world', in order to recreate a state of paradise believed to have been lost in a prior era.[26] But this is not always the case, especially since the rise of more evolutionary thinking about inevitable human progress. However, even today, when such progress is usually more soberly understood to entail scientific rather than moral growth, some apocalypses still imagine a utopian future that humanity alone may yet create.

Daniels highlights this inherently political nature of apocalyptic, which hopes to witness the transformation of the current world order, whether it is accomplished by divine or human agency.[27] This hope is grounded in a desire to overcome the problems associated with the prevailing authorities or powers. It acknowledges that something about the current situation in the world is corrupt, and someone needs to initiate change. The powers currently controlling the mundane realm have proved to be ineffective or abusive. Therefore, an alternative ideal, vision and/or power must intervene. From Daniels's perspective, every apocalypse should be understood as 'inherently political because it arises from the perception of political evil—the abuse of power—and seeks to remedy it'.[28] Even a predominantly passive response that serves as a 'rejection of [current] politics' constitutes a 'political' act, because 'the action of withdrawal condemns that which can not or will not change' of its own accord.[29] But while retreat and reclusion are considered viable alternatives for some, others will insist on taking action either to usher in the apocalypse as quickly as possible or to avoid it at all costs.

Regardless, in both ancient and modern manifestations, the 'prime motif' and goal of an apocalypse, and of apocalyptic rhetoric, is education designed to 'convert' both the prophet, who supposedly is the original recipient of a heavenly vision, and his audience, with whom he shares his unique insight.[30] Conversion usually entails more than a simple change of heart and mind. The ultimate goal is salvation, personal and/or corporate, and a new way of living in the present. As Daniels points out, the 'apocalypse is never about the literal end of all things,' but is instead geared toward a new beginning.[31] It may look forward to the end of the current order of reality—morally, spiritually, even cosmologically—and therefore reflect, on the surface, an escapist

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26. Daniels, 'Charters of Righteousness', p. 3.
27. Daniels, 'Charters of Righteousness', p. 5.
28. Daniels, 'Charters of Righteousness', p. 5.
29. Daniels, 'Charters of Righteousness', p. 6.
30. Daniels, 'Charters of Righteousness', p. 6.
31. Daniels, 'Charters of Righteousness', p. 11.

mentality, but even this can serve the more immediate purpose of making life in the present more bearable and meaningful. Alternatively, an apocalypse can also reflect a preservationist orientation that truly considers the present order of things to contain redeemable qualities or values that should not be completely abandoned.[32] Elaborate depictions of a nearly inevitable apocalyptic end to human history may also inspire an audience to begin working to avoid just such a scenario. Therefore, rhetorically speaking, the genre, like its later adaptations, is actually more versatile than many scholars have recognized.

Ultimately, Daniels ascribes a millennial perspective to all apocalyptic rhetoric, understanding it to be simultaneously subversive of this-worldly powers, yet decidedly focused on this-worldly redemption: 'It is the order of this world that is to be redeemed, and that is a political action, regardless of the nature of the agency that will bring it about.'[33] While this may not apply to all ancient and modern apocalyptic rhetoric, a majority of the modern adaptations do tend toward some form of this-worldly millennialism, and *Kingdom Come* is no exception. As we will see, what the graphic novel considers a faithful response to impending doom is for humans to believe in the inherent worth of themselves and others, to believe in their power to effect change, to forgive past mistakes and to be willing as individuals, if necessary, to make personal sacrifices for the betterment of the whole.

Kingdom Come as an Apocalyptic Text

When analyzing *Kingdom Come* as an apocalyptic text, one should attend to matters of both form and function. The work displays a number of elements characteristic of the genre of ancient apocalypses. But it also adapts some of these elements in ways that subvert the intentions of more traditional apocalyptic texts.

Kingdom Come, unlike its ancient predecessors, advertises itself as a fictional narrative. It is presented from the first-person perspective of an admittedly fictional prophet, who attempts to transform the worldview and behavior of other fictional characters in the story. All the while, this prophet is employed by the author to transform the thinking of the reader. Of course, when it comes to the fictional nature of the narrative, some may see little significant difference between this modern apocalypse and the ancient variety. But it is important to remember that the ancient versions purport to be nonfictional accounts. In addition, the graphic novel is formally distinct in that it includes 'sequential art' juxtaposed with text, which is significantly dif-

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32. Daniels, 'Charters of Righteousness', p. 11.
33. Daniels, 'Charters of Righteousness', p. 5.

ferent from a work consisting solely of narrative.[34] However, both apocalyptic forms are capable of delivering a message that is relevant and 'true' from the perspective of their authors. For just like the ancient apocalypses, *Kingdom Come* may serve as an effective coping mechanism for its intended audience and as an astute commentary on the culture in which it was produced. Like all great works of art, it may have important lessons to teach that transcend its original context. The chief crisis it attempts to address is modern-day humanity's immense technological advances and almost god-like power, which have made us capable not only of mass destruction but also self-annihilation. The state of world politics leaves us teetering precariously between such extremes as hopeless abandonment and reckless aggression. In response, the graphic novel attempts to provide the reader not just with a coping mechanism, which could inspire a more passive orientation, but rather it suggests a potential solution for those who will heed its deliberative rhetoric and take the initiative to save the world from itself.

Kingdom Come opens with a riveting image: an eagle—the body of which incorporates the stars and stripes of the American flag—confronting a red-eyed bat (p. 11), the latter representing the forces of darkness with which the United States must (or feels it must) contend. The surrounding text incorporates citations from the book of Revelation of John (8.7, 10 and 13), including a message of 'woe to the inhabiters of the Earth' (*Kingdom Come*, pp. 11-13). Together, image and text highlight the political perspective of the author, who intends metaphorically to address the role of the United States in the world economy of the late-twentieth century. America has power. America has to contend with evil. But at the outset, it is unclear what actually constitutes good and evil. In fact, the graphic novel maintains a certain degree of ambiguity and ambivalence on this matter throughout, even though it eventually critiques the hegemonic exercise of power, even (or perhaps especially) to achieve the noble goal of world peace.

Encoding messages in highly symbolic imagery is a common strategy in the apocalyptic genre, and this is normally designed as a means of subversive communication between the author and the originally intended audience. In the case of ancient Judaism and Christianity, where the Western form arose, it is commonly accepted that such encoding was intended to protect the beleaguered faithful from further persecution by the reigning 'pagan' authorities, who did not appreciate being critiqued by minority elements in their societies.

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34. Cf. Will Eisner, *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* (Will Eisner Instructional Books; New York: W. W. Norton, 2008); Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist* (Will Eisner Instructional Books; New York: W. W. Norton, 2008); Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Harper, 1994).

However, *Kingdom Come* uses this technique to blur the lines between good and evil, and this stands as an important point of contrast with the ancient genre, because the ancient works normally assume and reflect a clear and radical delineation between good and evil. Likewise, they look forward to a just resolution of this dichotomy by a definitive divine intervention that usually involves a final judgment, where all actors reap what they have sown. But for the graphic novel, any justice or peace that is not tempered with grace, humility, mercy and some amount of self-critique is considered problematic. *Kingdom Come* understands that if everyone simply reaps what they have sown, the whole world is lost. The graphic novel conceives of humanity in a more positive and progressive fashion, both technologically and morally, but not naively. It realizes that human ethics and power are often combined in dangerous and self-destructive ways, and it demonstrates that even the best of us (e.g. Superman) can be tempted down the wrong path. *Kingdom Come* hopes to 'unmask' the evil of misusing power in the name of doing good, and uses this 'revelation' as a catalyst for change, teaching the reader that human beings have the power to reject this kind of temptation.

The plot of *Kingdom Come* revolves around a washed-up preacher, Norman McCay, who is visited by a heavenly messenger named the Spectre, a character known in previous DC Comics productions for instituting divine justice in the mundane realm. Typical for the genre of the apocalypse (cf. e.g. Rev. 1.1), this messenger comes not immediately to institute God's judgment, but merely to announce its imminent arrival to a human recipient. McCay then becomes the local instrument (i.e. prophet) for reporting this divine message to his fellow humans. He also serves as a cipher for the way the graphic novel delivers a prophetic message to the reader.

As the plot unfolds, the reader quickly gathers that, since the retirement of Superman, the world has been in crisis mode. Humanity became complacent when Superman and his cohorts began policing the world, and ever since has depended on the super(natural) realm to solve its problems. But a new generation of would-be superheroes has now arisen, and they are unable to keep peace, either among themselves or with the humans. Some have not only willfully executed other supers, but unwittingly killed humans as well with collateral damage. This proves more than Superman can bear, so he returns from retirement to set things straight. But in the process of reestablishing order, he himself winds up resorting to rather extreme measures, going so far as building a special prison for any supers who refuse to play by his 'new' rules. Superman begins operating on the principle that others are either with him or against him; there is no middle ground. Career criminal Lex Luther takes advantage of the growing tension this creates among the supers, and manipulates Captain Marvel to break open the burgeoning prison, appar-

ently in a bid to eliminate his arch-rival, Superman, along with all his old Justice League allies, in the ensuing battle.[35]

The conflict proves to be of epic proportions, and more than humanity can bear. At this point, the graphic novel breaks away significantly from traditional apocalyptic convention. The Spectre, who has miraculously brought McCay along to witness the spectacle, now commands the preacher to do more than merely observe and report on what happens next. Instead, he is commanded to sit in judgment on his peers, essentially deciding the fate of all humanity and all the super beings.[36] McCay balks at this, rebelling at the idea that heaven has nothing more to offer at this crucial moment in history. And he watches helplessly as humanity's political leaders at the United Nations finally take action. They fire multiple nuclear bombs into the melee of supers in an attempt to eradicate all of them at once. Most of the warheads are diverted, thanks to the efforts of various superheroes, but one slips through, and Superman leaves it to Captain Marvel to decide whether the supers should survive this conflict or the humans. Again it appears to Superman that there is no middle ground. One or the other party must now suffer the immense consequences of the choices that have already been made. Marvel, however, rejects the 'us–them' dichotomy and chooses a different path. He decides that he will try to save both. But rather than use his ability to call down lightning to destroy the bomb from a safe distance, and perhaps risk missing his target altogether, he chooses a more dependable and personal approach—he uses his own body to detonate the warhead just before it reaches the other supers. In doing so, he guarantees its destruction, but also his own. He is able partially to shield the other supers from its effects, but he sacrifices his own life in the process. He succeeds in saving a significant number of supers, as well as the rest of humanity ... at least temporarily.

This resolution of conflict proves to be short-lived, because what follows is Superman's own fulmination, the climax of his fall. The Man of Steel becomes so enraged at the humans' attempt to destroy all the supers that he races to the United Nations to unleash his wrath in unbridled fashion. Finally, McCay has seen enough, and attempts to intervene. He demands that the Spectre transport him to the United Nations for an audience with Superman, the latter of whom he convinces not to take out his anger and frustration on the humans. Thus, with some amount of divine assistance, McCay is finally able to break the cycle of reciprocal violence.

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35. In the DC Comics universe, the Justice League was a team of superheroes consisting of such classic characters as Aquaman, Batman, The Flash, Green Lantern, Superman, and Wonder Woman.

36. Waid and Ross, *Kingdom Come*, pp. 180-81.

It is this crisis that the graphic novel believes is threatening to annihilate all earthly residents today. There is confusion and competition over how to define the true nature of heroism and villainy, good and evil. There is also lacking a clear and appropriate boundary between ends and means, as well as any divinely guaranteed outcome. In the meantime, while some seek to impose their wills on others, by force if necessary, others sit idly and ironically by, waiting for some otherworldly or superhuman solution to present itself. But just as the graphic novel treats Superman's return as a failed *parousia* (i.e. Second Coming), so it implicitly critiques those today who wait upon the return of a divine savior to solve all of humanity's problems.

Here it becomes clear that the character of Superman is designed to assist readers in reflecting on the questions of what makes one person morally superior to another, and what should humanity do for itself if, in fact, no transcendent solution to human problems is forthcoming. His struggle to resolve the age-old conflict between ends and means and his failed efforts to enforce (literally) a new peace on earth are designed to teach the reader a different path to peace, one based on an ethic of human initiative, cooperation and a willingness to embrace self-sacrifice rather than inflict harm on others.

The impracticality of using brute force to resolve conflict is a key component of the graphic novel's exploration of morality. Through a series of personal trials, Superman learns that *might* alone does not make one *right*. This is especially noteworthy in light of the high value placed on divine, retributive violence in classical apocalyptic (cf. especially, the so-called grapes of [divine] wrath in Rev. 14.18-20). Classical apocalypses promise that God will eventually deliver justice to right the wrongs of the past. But in *Kingdom Come*, simply waiting for a transcendent solution to humanity's rapidly-increasing potential for self-destruction is considered extremely problematic. Divine delay or passivity in the face of earthly injustice has led to an 'erosion' of 'human initiative' that occurred when humanity 'asked a new breed to face the future for them'.[37] *Kingdom Come*, unlike traditional apocalypses, considers it immoral for human beings to rely solely on on a 'Higher Power' to resolve their problems. As a result, the deity, rather ironically, communicates through the Spectre that heaven intends *not* to intervene, except to educate the residents of earth that a divine rescue will not be forthcoming.

Thus, *Kingdom Come* adapts traditional themes and values found in the apocalyptic tradition in order to argue that one of humanity's chief problems is a religiously inspired passivity. Humans too often look to the sky for help when the answer to their problems lies right beneath their own noses, namely, in the freedom to choose their own destiny. It is irresponsible for people to locate human salvation entirely in some higher power, even if, as the graphic

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37. Waid and Ross, *Kingdom Come*, p. 17.

novel interestingly portrays, that higher power truly exists. The reader should neither deny altogether the existence of heaven nor hope in it alone. While human choices may still lead to some kind of eternal consequences, *Kingdom Come* is more concerned with the immediate practicality of human initiative and human potential for shaping reality here and now.

But it should be stated that the graphic novel does not intend to argue for a purely utilitarian ethic. Such an approach is clearly demonstrated by the pathetic character Magog (cf. pp. 36-38; 93-101), who at least initially embraces violence as the necessary tool for keeping chaos at bay. Earlier in the story, during Superman's absence from public service, Magog takes up the mantel of world protector, and begins by assassinating Batman's long-standing nemesis, the Joker. But later, his reckless pursuit of another villain leads to a million human deaths, the destruction of the entire state of Kansas and the nuclear irradiation of America's agricultural "breadbasket."[38] At first, he chalks this up to collateral damage, but after confronting Superman upon the latter's return, he clearly acknowledges that his own utilitarian ethic was less than ideal. He then harshly criticizes Superman for abandoning his post. A similar utilitarian ethic is reflected in the attitude of the world leaders at the United Nations, who eventually decide to use nuclear weapons to annihilate all the supers (pp. 165-66). This embrace of violence is prevalent in the ancient apocalypses, which sometimes describe the end of the world in gruesome detail, seemingly relishing their depictions of the evil ones receiving brutal punishment at the hand of the divine judge of the universe.

But *Kingdom Come* rejects the extremes of both radical passivity and radical utilitarianism. It affirms the reality of the transcendent, but re-imagines its ideal relationship to the mundane. It does this in some ways that are traditionally apocalyptic, but in others that are nontraditional. Like most apocalyptic prophets, Pastor McCay is led by a divine messenger on a tour of sights and sounds inaccessible to the average human. He is inspired at the end of the tour, not unlike Ebenezer Scrooge in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, to do something to avert his own (and his own world's) destruction.[39] But while affirming the reality of a transcendent realm through McCay's interaction with the Spectre, *Kingdom Come* never explores the 'otherworld' in any significant way, such as in the classical apocalyptic genre. One encounters here no divinely conceived and pre-established plan simply awaiting the proper time to be divinely instituted. Instead, at best, God only intends to help those who are willing to help themselves. This represents the central truth claim of the graphic novel. Today's humans possess godlike power, at least by the stand-

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38. Waid and Ross, *Kingdom Come*, pp. 37-38.
39. Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (London: Chapman & Hall, orig. pub., 1843).

ards of their forebears, but they must wield it with godlike wisdom, lest they risk dying a most un-godlike death.

This message is made clear in the verbal exchange between Pastor McCay and the Spectre during McCay's miraculous tour of the rising conflict between superhero, super villain, and human, which threatens to end in its own self-induced Armageddon. McCay becomes flabbergasted by heaven's unwillingness to offer any concrete assistance, which again is typically promised in classical apocalyptic texts:

> McCay: That's all? That's what you have to show me?
> Spectre: That disturbs you?
> McCay: Yes! You're an angel! That makes you a messenger of hope!
> Spectre: At no time did I promise you hope . . .
> McCay: A greater power sent you! Your very existence is a testimony to faith! You mean that all you have to tell me is that those who could save us won't?[40]

Later, the Spectre reveals to McCay that 'long have these mortals suspected that they are no longer the captains of humanity's destiny', suggesting that humans are characterized by a sense of powerlessness to change their world and have therefore relinquished responsibility for even trying.[41] They look to the heavens or to the supers to secure the future, not unlike McCay himself. But it is this very kind of paralysis and passivity for which the end is rapidly approaching. Not acting at all, in the belief that humans cannot make a difference, is treated here as an evil worthy of achieving its just reward—perdition. The transcendent realm refuses to intervene in order to let humanity and the supers reap what they have sown. Heaven's final act is, in essence, to reveal that the divine realm will not be intervening further in human affairs.

When the world's human governments do temporarily abandon their passive stance in an attempt to eradicate their enemies, their brief embrace of classical apocalypticism's violent solution to the problem of evil is eclipsed by Marvel's self-sacrificial messianism. The message of this risky attempt to forestall the end seems to be that the only acceptable and potentially redemptive form of violence is the self-inflicted variety, namely, sacrificing oneself on behalf of others.

After Marvel's dying deed, the Spectre prepares to return from whence he came, suggesting that the will of heaven has now been accomplished. Humanity has finally taken responsibility for determining its own fate. But it is a fate that is far from ideal. The death toll from the explosion is high, as a great number of supers are now dead. However, the lesson seems lost on most of the characters in the story, including Superman, who speeds away to unleash his anger on his human attackers at the United Nations. McCay, still playing

40. Waid and Ross, *Kingdom Come*, p. 49.
41. Waid and Ross, *Kingdom Come*, p. 70.

the role of prophet, foresees a new wave of violence about to erupt, but here his role shifts from that of apocalyptic seer, who merely reports impending doom, to a more active mediator. He demands that the Spectre continue his miraculous journey, transporting him one last time, for a personal audience with Superman. Here, McCay fulfills a more classical prophetic role normally found in Hebrew Bible/Old Testament texts written prior to the development of the apocalyptic genre. He becomes a human mediator, who calls humanity to repentance, but who also occasionally challenges the god(s) on humanity's behalf.[42] This initiative by McCay to change the natural or inevitable course of events is in direct opposition to classical apocalyptic passivity, but it is a crucial component of the ancient Israelite prophetic tradition. Here, he demonstrates the ideal response not just to human passivity but also to divine passivity and its traditional, apocalyptic opposite—destructive violence. He counsels Superman to embrace the path of forgiveness, including forgiving himself for his prior failures.

A new *Kingdom* (the real Kingdom of God?) finally does *Come* in the graphic novel when McCay convinces Superman to forgive himself for his prior mistake of abandoning humanity and to resist the temptation to take his frustrations out on others.[43] McCay tells Superman,

> Your instinctive knowledge ... of right ... and wrong ... was a gift of your own humanity ... the minute you made the super more important than the man ... the day you decided to turn your back on mankind ... completely cost you your instinct. That took your judgment away. Take it back.[44]

42. Cf., e.g., Abraham advocating for Sodom in Genesis 18 (he is referred to as a prophet in Gen. 20.7), Moses advocating for Israel at Sinai in Exodus 32, and Ezekiel advocating for the Judean remnant in Ezek. 11.1-13. Cf. also Yochanan Muffs, 'Who Will Stand in the Breach? A Study of Prophetic Intercession', in Yochanan Muffs (ed.), *Love and Joy: Law, Language, and Religion in Ancient Israel* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 9-48. Some scholars consider parts of Ezekiel 'proto-apocalyptic' (e.g. chs. 38-39), but they do not clarify the role of advocacy on behalf of humanity as an apocalyptic trait.

43. At the risk of some speculation, it is worth considering the potential metaphorical and theological parallels between Superman's situation and traditional apocalypticism. In each case, the reality of chaos and injustice in the mundane realm leads to disappointed and disaffected believers, and this demands rectification. The typical solution is for humans to hold out hope for the divine/super realm to institute violent justice in the end, to punish all evildoers, and reward the righteous, the time for forgiveness and grace having passed. Even God/Superman has his limits. Justice is better late than never, for if it promises never to come, then faith in God/Superman has little to commend itself. Superman almost succumbs to this temptation, but eventually rejects it as less than ideal. Curiously, a great many modern-day religious adherents do not reach the same conclusion about faith in a literal, divinely instituted apocalypse.

44. Waid and Ross, *Kingdom Come*, p. 193.

Just as humanity must determine its own fate, so must the human part of Superman hold sway over the superhuman.

Superman relents, and goes on to condemn the 'false division' between humans and super humans, which Elliot Maggin discusses in the graphic novel's introduction.[45] Superman interprets Captain Marvel's sacrifice as an attempt to expose this untruth 'in the hope that your world and our world could be one world once again'.[46] The false division between human and divine must be acknowledged and embraced if humans are to act appropriately. Each realm must take responsibility for its actions, or as the case may be, its inaction. Perhaps the two are really not that distinct.

The story ends with McCay reflecting on the nature of dreams and visions. Not every dream is necessarily prophetic, in the sense of offering a dependable prediction of the future, but instead, 'the future . . . like so much else . . . is open to interpretation' and alteration.[47] This signals to the reader that the vision of the graphic novel is one of hope and responsibility, a call not to passive but more pacifistic heroism.

While *Kingdom Come* encourages modern readers to think and act as if they have godlike power at their disposal, it also suggests the possibility that, at times, forgiveness and self-sacrifice are more heroic responses than trying to eradicate evil by force, especially when evil is simplistically construed as being just an external reality. What the reader is most heroically called upon to sacrifice is the desire for justice rather than mercy and grace. It is this kind of sacrifice that holds the greatest prospect for breaking the cycle of reciprocal violence.[48]

Conclusion

Traditional apocalypses are, literarily speaking, simpler in form than the graphic novel. They use highly descriptive language, metaphors and symbols in their story telling, which allow the reader to imaginatively experience what the seer/prophet in the narrative claims to have seen, be it the

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45. Waid and Ross, *Kingdom Come*, p. 195. This perspective is shared by Maggin in the graphic novel's introduction, where he refers to today's human as yesterday's superhuman: 'If a person from only a hundred years or so in the past could look in on our lives, that person would suppose that we were not mortals, but gods. He would be bowled over by what the most ordinary among us could do ... This is the way many of us have always looked upon our super-heroes—as though they were gods' (p. 5).

46. Waid and Ross, *Kingdom Come*, p. 196.

47. Waid and Ross, *Kingdom Come*, p. 203.

48. For deeper examinations of reciprocal violence, see René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (trans. Patrick Gregory; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), and René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).

future or other present realms of reality. The intended reader ideally "sees" in the mind's eye what the text claims that the prophet as first-person narrator experiences. In this way, rhetorically speaking, an apparently unique visionary experience reserved only for the original prophet is mediated to a larger audience. In some cases, the original prophet struggles to describe the wondrous things that (s)he sees, as if language alone fails to capture the reality of the experience. Here, the reader's imagination must fill in any gaps that remain in the narrative, the rhetorical effect being that whatever the reader can glean is less marvelous and merely an approximation of what the original prophet received in his/her own experience. The intention is to make the revelation appear unique, authoritative and off-limits to alteration (cf. Rev. 22.18-19).

Within the text, one also encounters an angelic being, which interacts with the prophet and clarifies the meaning of the vision for the sake of both prophet and reader. Thus, there are multiple levels at which the author's message may be mediated. The text itself mediates a message for the author as prophet. Within the text, one encounters a first-person narrator–prophet, who may or may not be equated with the author, because in some cases this person is merely a literary construct. The angel, who may also be a literary construct, further mediates an apparently divine communication. And finally, readers may mediate a message to others in response to their own hearing or reading of the original text.

In addition to these, the reader of the graphic novel has the artist's images available for his/her own literal seeing, as well as having access to text. The benefit of this sequential art form is that it allows the reader to become a more faithful seer of the creator's (author's/artist's) vision, but it also provides more material requiring reader interpretation. With the ancient apocalypse, when the reader creates his/her own images in response to the text, these are already the product of reader interpretation. With the graphic novel, a second layer of seeing is added by the fact that, from one panel to another, the perspective of the reader often shifts from first person to third person. Here, the reader is not limited to the perspective of the traditional form's first-person prophetic narration.

Just as with the ancient apocalypse, there remains a physical text that can be accessed repeatedly by rereading the graphic novel, but the experience of hearing the text secondhand is not the same as experiencing it with one's own eyes. This is because the graphic novel apocalypse allows the reader-as-prophet a more immediate, complex, sensory experience of the author's own vision. It allows all readers to experience this same unfiltered vision, prior to their own interpretation, and be thereby authorized as prophetic messengers to others if they consider the experience revelatory. But in either case, the apocalyptic genre provides its audience with an author as apocalyptic prophet, mediating

truth to his intended audience through a complex art form that includes the character of a prophet in its narrative, and which ultimately seeks to convert the reader into a prophet, who will further mediate the work's intended message.[49]

   In contrast to the ancient apocalypses, which are prosaic, first-person reports couched within a larger narrative framework, *Kingdom Come* provides image and text that are juxtaposed in the context of a more complex story with a well-developed plot. Additionally, this particular graphic novel's readers benefit from having access to an interpretive introduction written by another author (Maggin, pp. 5-7), which may guide them to a more appropriate interpretation of the larger work.

   Kingdom Come attempts to provide a prophetic voice for modern society by giving the reader crucial and timely apocalyptic rhetoric, from the perspective of a self-appointed prophetic artist. It adapts the classical apocalyptic genre of both the historical sketch and the otherworldly journey, but subverts other features of the genre in the hope of inspiring a comic rather than tragic End for all potential readers. It suggests that the fate of all humanity and superbeings is entwined. The creators assume the authority to speak on matters of supreme importance for society, not by making explicit reference to their own divinely received truth but by exercising the artistic talent and opportunity via mass media to create an observant audience. The nature, source and value of their talent remain to be evaluated by each individual reader. Nevertheless, the genre of the graphic novel provides a highly effective medium for the modern reader 'to vicariously experience disasters as well as enabling an unprecedented potential for the dissemination of the "revealed truth" of a [modern day] apocalyptic vision'.[50]

   Kingdom Come's vision allows the wary reader to reevaluate the potential of humanity to be heroic, to do something super-natural or supra-normal. It imagines a new order of reality in which the reader may become a responsible god of a new age, without denying the existence of a traditional creator deity who, at times, purposely and responsibly behaves in transcendent ways. As a literary product, the graphic novel apocalypse hopes to circumvent a literal apocalypse in the shared world of both author and reader. It represents a politico-educational endeavor, arguing that humanity's common enemy is

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49. Alternatively, one might consider the author/artist here not simply as prophet, but as creator, sending an authoritative message to an audience of potential prophets. I thank A. David Lewis and Marvin Perry Mann—writer and artist, respectively, of *The Lone and Level Sands* (Kearny, NJ: Archaia Studio Press, 2nd edn, 2006)—for helping me to consider the comic author/artist in this way. Perhaps this ultimately depends on what the artist/author considers the source of his/her inspiration, that is, whether it is self-generated or received from without.

50. Marc Fonda, 'Postmodernity and the Imagination of the Apocalypse: A Study of Genre', in O'Leary and McGhee (eds.), *War in Heaven, Heaven on Earth*, pp. 163-81 (166).

not external but rather internal. Here, the art of rhetoric becomes the key tool for transforming and capitalizing on inherent human potential.

The vehicle for such rhetoric, as well as its effectiveness, is dependent upon the available means of mass communication, a situation that also held for the ancient apocalypse. Like its predecessors, the modern apocalypse is merely an adaptation of existing motifs and genres, repackaged in order to meet the perceived challenges of a new age. It provides for its intended audience a new and more relevant myth to guide its self-understanding and behavior. Like all myths, it is 'founded on the best-available evidence', and the best-available format, 'at any given time'.[51]

As Marc Fonda notes in his 'Postmodernity and the Imagination of the Apocalypse', 'When a specific myth no longer functions as a[n] efficient theory or cosmology for a society, new ones rise to attention . . . These "new" myths were already present as cultural artifacts because they emerged out of the old myths.'[52] The same could be said for some of the modern apocalypses. In an age when super-powered weapons threaten humanity with annihilation, and divine intervention promised long ago is still not forthcoming, new ways of imagining the future will have to be created to provide hope for the present. These new ways will incorporate what is still considered valuable in the old, but they will couple that with new or adapted forms and motifs in order to provide a more feasible and rhetorically pleasing message for the times in which we find ourselves.

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51. Fonda, 'Postmodernity and the Imagination of the Apocalypse', p. 172, following Robert W. Brockway, *Myth from the Ice Age to Mickey Mouse* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 93.

52. Brockway, *Myth*, p. 93. Cf. also Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

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6. Of Beasts and Men: The Book of Revelation and the Apocalyptic Superhero

Gregory Stevenson

Apocalyptic is the language of mythology. Mythology employs stories composed out of the fantastic (gods, angels, monsters, red dragons) as a means of organizing and conceptualizing the normal. Mythology organizes a culture's values, experiences and beliefs into a coherent narrative that provides clarity to the interpretation of life.[1] The superhero story is also the language of mythology. In this essay I will examine the outcome that results when the mythological language of apocalyptic combines with the mythological language of the superhero. In both instances, these narratives of divine-like beings interacting with humanity to wage a battle of good versus evil for the salvation of the world function to provide stories that make sense of a group's varied and often-confusing experiences with the world. Both employ the creation of a symbolic world in narrative form as a way of offering a new perspective on the world. Just as apocalyptic narratives compel readers to view the natural world in light of the supernatural, superhero narratives compel readers to view the human in light of the superhuman.

The Book of Revelation and Apocalyptic Mythology

Apocalyptic narratives create a symbolic world that thrives on conflict between opposing forces. Order and chaos, light and darkness are at war with each other, and the outcome of that war will determine the fate of the world. The book of Revelation presents this conflict as an eternal and spiritual battle between God and Satan (represented as a red dragon) that manifests itself symbolically in the physical world as a war between the Beast (a symbol of Roman power) and the followers of God (Revelation 12–13). This dualistic conflict reaches its climax in a final battle that has come to be known as Armageddon (Rev. 16.14, 16).

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1. Billie Wahlstrom and Caren Deming, 'Chasing the Popular Arts through the Critical Forest', *Journal of Popular Culture* 13.3 (1980), pp. 412-26 (413-14).

Although apocalyptic mythology relies heavily on conflict, conflict is not the ultimate point. Rather, conflict is one mythological trope employed to afford perspective. The apocalyptic perspective on the world derives from the way that it exposes perceived reality to the supernatural and to the future. John Collins writes that the apocalyptic perspective 'is framed spatially by the supernatural world and temporally by the eschatological judgment'.[2] The word 'apocalypse' means a 'revealing', and that is what apocalyptic does. It reveals truth about the world by exposing it to transcendence, to that which stands outside of normal, physical parameters. Apocalyptic encourages the hearer or reader to view the natural world from the perspective of the supernatural. When John describes Roman power as a beast who sits on a throne and makes the world worship him (Rev. 13.2, 8), he is providing a symbolic description of how his audience experiences reality—Rome has all power and authority in the world. Yet that 'reality' becomes suspect in light of the supernatural vision John provides in Revelation 4–5, a vision in which God sits on a heavenly throne and all creation willingly offers him worship. The question John addresses is: Who rules in this world? His answer is that the vision of ch. 13, with the beast on a throne, is mere illusion, a false perception. It is the *supernatural* or visionary perspective of chs. 4 and 5 that provide the reality that, despite all physical perceptions to the contrary, it is in fact God who rules over the universe. On the mythological level of apocalyptic, it is the symbolic world that the author presents that defines the real world. In this sense, apocalyptic language is the language of transformation. By getting hearers/viewers to see the world anew from a transcendent perspective, apocalyptic effectively transforms the world in their experience.[3]

This act of transformation through the awarding of a new perspective also benefits from the temporal framing device of the eschatological endpoint. End-of-the-world scenarios that figure so prominently in apocalyptic mythology, combined with an outlook on the world as a place of injustice and evil, have often generated the belief that apocalyptic is thoroughly pessimistic in its view of the world and of human nature. Two prominent features of apocalyptic eschatology, however, modify this conclusion. First, the eschatological consummation is not primarily about destruction, but about the ultimate defeat of evil and the bursting forth of *new creation* out of the old (Rev. 21.1-5). In this sense, one could say that the world of apocalyptic is 'a world of

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2. John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2nd edn, 1998), p. 41.

3. Gregory Stevenson, *Power and Place: Temple and Identity in the Book of Revelation* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), pp. 14-15; David L. Barr, 'The Apocalypse as a Symbolic Transformation of the World: A Literary Analysis', *Interpretation* 38 (1984), pp. 39-50 (49).

lively optimism'.[4] The 'end' leads to a new beginning; destruction gives way to creation. In this sense, apocalyptic involves a dialectic of despair and hope. Second, seeing apocalyptic as primarily a foretelling of the end confuses content with function. Language about the future functions in apocalyptic to provide perspective on the present, much like the prospect of death compels an individual to see life in a new way. The 'end of the world' is not the point of apocalyptic;[5] rather, it affords the opportunity for transformation of one's present perspective along the lines of hope and optimism for the future—whether that is the future of this world or of the world to come.[6]

Consequently, the theme of apocalyptic conflict must be interpreted in light of both the spatial and temporal dimensions of its symbolic world. By exposing an individual's or group's human conflict to the transcendent, supernatural world, apocalyptic elevates these political, religious, social, economic and ethnic conflicts from the physical and natural realm to the spiritual and metaphysical realm. They become not just human power struggles but metaphysical battles between good and evil.[7] When Revelation exposes its audience's political and religious conflict with Rome to transcendence and describes Roman claims of authority and power as a demonic beast and aligns it with the dragon, Revelation reconceives that conflict as not just a first-century struggle between an empire and a marginalized group, but as one manifestation of the eternal battle between God and Satan. Likewise, the threat of eschatological termination casts the conflict of opposing forces in a new light. The rapid approach of the end ups the ante by presenting the

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4. Morton S. Enslin, 'The Apocalyptic Literature', in Charles M. Layman (ed.), *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), pp. 1106-1109 (1108).

5. When Abraham Kawa states that, because 'the end of everything' never actually arrives, therefore the apocalypse in comics 'is little more than a plot device, a suspenseful and ultimately tongue-in-cheek twist designed to keep heroes and readers in a state of anticipation', he favors apocalyptic content (the end of everything) to the exclusion of function (perspective) rather than address the interrelation between the two. See his 'What if the Apocalypse Never Happens: Evolutionary Narratives in Contemporary Comics', in Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen (eds.), *Comics and Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics* (Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, Museum Tusculanum Press, 2000), pp. 209-24 (216).

6. See also Christopher Rowland, '"Upon Whom the Ends of the Ages Have Come": Apocalyptic and the Interpretation of the New Testament', in Malcolm Bull (ed.), *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 38-57 (43, 46-47).

7. The danger here is that a group might abuse the apocalyptic perspective by using it to justify themselves while demonizing whoever would oppose them, thus often producing violence and oppression. On the other hand, when appropriated responsibly, the apocalyptic perspective motivates people to view their physical struggles in the light of the larger spiritual or moral issues at stake.

conflict as a battle for the very survival or salvation of the world. These ulti-mate stakes clarify priorities and focus one's attention on what really matters.

<center>*The Mythology of Superheroes*</center>

Famed comic book creator Stan Lee wrote, 'I wasn't consciously trying to inject religious themes into my stories, but . . . religious and mythological themes are often dramatically intertwined in comic books.'[8] The mythology of the superhero derives from the superhero's role as an agent of transcend-ence. The superhero stands distinctly outside of the normal as a nearly god-like being. B.J. Oropeza notes, 'Many superhero myths mimic the language of god-man mythology with traits such as noble origins, god-like powers, and savior capabilities.'[9] Although the superhero is an outsider to the normal and the mundane, superhero narratives typically take place in the mundane, everyday world.[10] Consequently, the superhero often tries to live at least part of his or her life as a normal human being. So Superman, the ultimate out-sider as an alien, embraces the persona of Clark Kent. This mix of the nor-mal and the fantastic illustrates the superhero's identity as both human and superhuman.

Consequently, the superhero as mythological figure accomplishes two purposes. First, it provides perspective. As *super*human, the hero stands a step or two outside of and above the normal, thus allowing us to view the world and humanity from a different perspective. Superheroes let us see our-selves through the eyes of the outsider in much the same way that apocalyptic encourages us to see ourselves through the eyes of God.

Second, as super*human*, the hero serves as a magnified reflection of ourselves and our desires. These narratives 'give substance to certain ideo-logical myths about the society they address', even as they 'examine society through the window of their own very peculiar viewpoint'.[11] In these sto-ries, the superhero embodies the values, anxieties, fears and hopes of the wider culture. They inspire because they demonstrate metaphorically that humans can overcome the various threats and obstacles they face and so become more than they thought themselves capable of. In this sense, these

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8. Stan Lee, 'Foreword', in B.J. Oropeza (ed.), *The Gospel according to Superheroes: Religion and Popular Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), p. xii.

9. B.J. Oropeza, 'Introduction: Superhero Myth and the Restoration of Paradise', in *The Gospel according to Superheroes*, pp 1-24 (5).

10. Richard Reynolds, *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), p. 74.

11. Reynolds, *Superheroes*, p. 74.

stories are 'not about gods, but about the way humans wish themselves to be; ought, in fact, to be'.[12]

Comics and Revelation

Given the thematic and mythological overlap between superhero and apocalyptic narratives, as well as the heightened visual nature of apocalyptic language that renders it easily translatable to the graphic image, one might expect that the book of Revelation has long served as a direct and influential source for comic-book writers. This is not the case. Prior to the 1980s, the influence of the book of Revelation on comic books was minimal. From the mid-1980s up to the present, however, an explosion of interest in Revelation among writers of comic books has occurred. If a superhero narrative is a reflection of its time, then what features of Western culture over the last twenty-five years might account for this increased interest in apocalyptic mythology on the part of the creators of comic books and graphic novels? One likely reason for this burgeoning interest in apocalyptic narratives is increased anxiety over the fate of the world. That the initial wave of interest in the book of Revelation coincided with nuclear proliferation and the fear of nuclear war in the 1980s is significant. Add to that the anxiety of the Y2K scare, the threat of terrorism and the events of 9/11, and the resulting mixture is a potent recipe for fascination with apocalyptic.

A second factor is that the 1980s, with their rampant deconstructionism and revisionism, ushered in the postmodern age of comics. One characteristic feature of the postmodern worldview is the embrace of moral ambiguity. Following the appearance of *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* in 1986, superhero comics took a darker and grittier turn. Heroes became more violent and morally conflicted. The stark confrontation between good (the superhero) and evil (the supervillain) in the Golden and Silver Ages gave way to a more internal conflict. Even as the heroes of the postmodern age go to battle against ostensible villains, they are really fighting a battle within themselves, a battle between their own potential for good and evil. Ironically, the dualism of apocalyptic is typically anything but ambiguous, yet postmodern creators of comic books and graphic novels have latched onto apocalyptic dualism as a way of explaining the often-ambiguous impulses that compete for attention within humanity.

Specifically, the book of Revelation, with its dualism of good and evil set in the context of a final battle, provides a fertile field for comic writers who wish to explore these competing impulses toward destruction and creation

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12. Elliot S. Maggin, 'Introduction', in Mark Waid and Alex Ross, *Kingdom Come* (New York: DC Comics, 1997), pp. 5-7 (6).

within humanity and human society. The apocalypse and the war of Armageddon serve as powerful metaphors of those impulses. Events like 9/11 and the realization that humankind could destroy itself through nuclear war, bioengineered viruses and unchecked technology remind us of humanity's potential for destruction on an apocalyptic scale.

This essay presents four examples of the influence of the book of Revelation on superhero narratives: *Spawn: The Armageddon Collection*, *Superman #666*, *Batman #666* and *X-Men: Age of Apocalypse*. Each explores the interaction of good and evil, creation and destruction, within the confines of an apocalyptic threat to humanity. They demonstrate that when apocalyptic mythology meets superhero mythology, the result is often a narrative exploration of human nature that comforts us with visions of the victory of good over evil while at the same time reminding us that the triumph of human goodness lasts only until the next battle.

Spawn: The Armageddon Collection

Spawn is a quintessential postmodern superhero: dark, morally ambiguous, firmly situated between good and evil while fully embracing neither. Spawn is Al Simmons, a mercenary soldier who died but was allowed to return to earth as a Hellspawn with the understanding that he would fight in the upcoming battle of Armageddon, the war between God and Satan. What remained unclear, however, was the side on which he would fight. In *The Complete Armageddon Collection*, which gathers issues 150 to 164 of the ongoing series, the battle of Armageddon comes to pass and Spawn finally reveals his allegiance.[13]

As a character caught between heaven and hell, Spawn is a viable metaphor for the dualistic impulses within human nature. As one who often fights for good while carrying about him 'the stench of decay and corruption and unrepented sin', he walks the line between hero and villain, demon and human.[14] What keeps him tied to his humanity and from fully becoming a spawn of hell is Wanda, his human widow. His love for her forms the link to the man he once was. Consequently, Spawn must constantly navigate between the demon and the human within him. It is his eventual choice between those two sides of his nature that will determine the fate of the world. The statement that one character makes to Spawn, after explaining to him the story of the Hindu goddess Kali, applies equally well to *The Armageddon Collection*

13. Todd McFarlane, David Hine and Brian Holguin, *Spawn: The Complete Armageddon Collection* (Berkeley, CA: Image Comics, 2007).

14. *Spawn* #149.

itself: 'This story is an allegory, representing the eternal battle between the creative and destructive sides of our nature. It's not intended as literal truth.'[15]

The Armageddon Collection relates events leading up to and following the battle of Armageddon. Apocalyptic signs dot the landscape—the Mississippi River turns to blood, toads rain down from the sky, the sun turns black, the moon turns red, and the Four Horsemen lay waste to Los Angeles. The armies of hell enlist the souls in their charge to fight on their behalf while the armies of heaven inaugurate the Rapture as a means of drafting the faithful to their side. Heaven and hell are thus arrayed for war, with humanity caught in the middle. With the final battle fast approaching, the time has come for Spawn to choose sides.

The cosmology of the series reveals its interest in the duality of human nature and the importance of free will. One way it does this is by redefining God and Satan as beings with little interest in humanity beyond humanity's role as pawns in their eternal game. Both are depicted as bickering children at war with each other and 'trapped in a cycle of endless self-destruction'.[16] They are the product of a Mother of Creation who takes many forms, among them the Hindu goddess Kali (goddess of death and destruction), the 'Man of Miracles' and Jesus. In this narrative, she is the creator of the universe. Consequently, human beings owe their ultimate origin to one who is both the Mother of Creation and the goddess of destruction, thus making them the heirs of both. However, human beings are not free to choose between the creative and destructive sides of their nature as long as they are forced participants in the war between heaven and hell.

Though decidedly unbiblical in its portrayal of God and the act of creation, *The Armageddon Collection* presents these concepts as an allegory designed to shift the focus away from apocalyptic determinism and toward human free will. Humanity is trapped in a battle not of its own making and is incapable of freeing itself. They need a savior, and the morally conflicted Spawn is their only option. Spawn alone must pave the way toward the total destruction of humanity or its salvation. It is his choice that will seal the fate of the world. Ultimately, Spawn refuses to side with either heaven or hell, choosing instead to fight on behalf of humanity.

In order to wage this battle, though, Spawn must first understand the nature of the fight. The Mother of Creation provides the necessary perspective. She is the agent of transcendence who reveals truth to Spawn and forces him to see the world and himself in new ways. She tells him, 'You fight, you kill. You destroy. But there are other ways to gain a victory.'[17] A dominant image in the book of Revelation is the slain lamb, the image of sacrifice.

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15. *Spawn* #155.
16. *Spawn* #163.
17. *Spawn* #156.

Jesus as the lamb gains victory over Satan not through physical power and might but through weakness and self-sacrifice. Thus, the Mother of Creation, appearing to Spawn in the form of Jesus, tells him that the life of Jesus only possessed meaning because of the crucifixion.[18] In other words, Spawn's victory must come through suffering and sacrifice.

With the battle of Armageddon raging and leaving destruction in its wake, Spawn travels to the Garden of Eden, as it exists in a parallel dimension, and there encounters the Twelve Apostles. In order to gain access to the Tree of Life, he must defeat the Twelve in combat. With only Judas remaining, Spawn refuses to fight any longer and allows Judas to slay him. Completing the analogy to the Christ event, the Mother of Creation resurrects Spawn and grants him the power of a god, noting, 'Through his death and suffering he has proven himself worthy.'[19] Spawn then uses his new power to destroy every living thing on earth, seeing it as the only way to free all human beings from their forced conscription into the armies of heaven and hell.

Despite the common cultural trope of viewing 'the Apocalypse' in terms of final destruction and devastation, the ultimate goal of apocalyptic mythology is new creation. Destruction and creation stand interrelated at the center of apocalyptic thought. So after destroying the earth, Spawn uses his god-like power to recreate it, restoring all that he had destroyed. Humanity is made whole; yet if it is to thrive, it must embrace the tension between destruction and creation. Thus, a narrator, after describing the restoration of the world, notes that 'the memory of those terrible days of Apocalypse remained with them. No one would ever forget the horror of the End of Days when the Horsemen rode the Earth. For it was from that dark despair that hope was born.'[20] The apocalyptic hope is not one of salvation *from* suffering, but salvation *through* suffering. It is the hope of creation arising out of destruction.

The Armageddon Collection is essentially a treatise on free will. Spawn achieved his victory in the battle of Armageddon; yet for him, the real battle was far from over. As with humanity, Spawn must come to terms with his own propensity for destruction and creation. The real battle he fights is the battle within himself and with his own dual nature. As a reward for his victory, Spawn asks to be made human again with the intention of returning to Wanda, his former wife. With his humanity as Al Simmons restored, however, he suddenly remembers what kind of human he had been: violent and abusive. It was his own abusive actions toward Wanda when she was pregnant that had caused her to lose their child. Forced to confront these destructive tendencies within himself, Al Simmons again reclaims his identity as Spawn as a form of penance. The final scene of the series captures the essence of

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18. *Spawn* #161.
19. *Spawn* #163.
20. *Spawn* #163.

the postmodern superhero. Spawn sits alone in a dank alley as the narrator states: 'He is Al Simmons . . . The man who saved the world, but could not save himself.'[21] Spawn is a potent metaphor of humanity's dual nature and the ongoing battle between those two sides. Thus, he finds himself forever caught between heaven and hell, between his own destructive nature and his desire to recreate himself anew.

Batman #666 and Superman #666

Batman and Superman are both classic heroes from the Golden Age of comics, yet they represent very different ends of the superhero spectrum. Superman is the ultimate outsider, an alien of nearly god-like power. He stands for nobility and righteousness reconceived as the battle for 'truth, justice, and the American way'. Batman, by contrast, is thoroughly human, his power deriving from such mundane qualities as wealth, scientific acumen and greatly honed physical skills. What drives Batman, at least in his current incarnation, is not the quest for higher ideals like truth and justice but the pathological need for vengeance.[22]

As mythological stories, the narratives of Superman and Batman encapsulate the desires, fears and aspirations of their culture. They reflect something of ourselves back to us. In his origin, Superman embodied the values of 1930s America, representing how Americans of the time wanted to see themselves—'youthful, physically vigorous, morally upright'.[23] As the culture changed, so did the characterization of Superman, so that the Superman of our increasingly postmodern society is less mild-mannered, more emotionally volatile and having to navigate truth and justice through a sea of moral ambiguity.[24] Yet the character's central core remains the same. He represents a nearly god-like perfection of human values and the ultimate embodiment of the triumph of good over evil. Superman is transcendent, an unattainable model of perfection that nonetheless reflects humanity's desire to be more than we are capable of being. In this sense, Superman serves as 'a myth of our human

21. *Spawn* #164.

22. Les Daniels, *DC Comics: Sixty Years of the World's Favorite Comic Book Heroes* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), p. 190. Part of the value of mythology is its elasticity, which means its ability to bend in order to fit the needs of different narrative contexts. Thus, whereas Batman may function as a symbol of vengeance in some works, in others he more properly appears as a symbol of the quest for atonement. For this latter perspective, see the quote by Paul Dini in Chip Kidd and Geoff Spear, *Mythology: The DC Comics Art of Alex Ross* (New York: Pantheon Books/DC Comics, 2003).

23. Jeffrey S. Lang and Patrick Trimble, 'Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow: An Examination of the American Monomyth and the Comic Book Superhero', *Journal of Popular Culture* 22.3 (1988), pp. 157-73 (159-60).

24. Lang and Trimble, 'Whatever Happened', pp. 171-72.

existence'.[25] By contrast, Batman is 'the ultimate humanistic myth'.[26] If Superman represents perfection from without, Batman represents perfection from within. Although he starts off with certain inherited advantages such as nearly unlimited wealth, Bruce Wayne employs his own intelligence, effort and will-power to make himself super-human. As Robertson notes, 'He is not the one who soars down from the heavens, but rather one who rises up from among all-too-human people . . . This myth . . . is about making one's destiny, not waiting for it to fall down from the sky like a rocket.'[27] The model of perfection Batman represents is thus attainable in theory, if not in reality.

Thom Parham writes that, even in a postmodern culture that embraces moral ambiguity, 'readers still find solace in the absolute heroics of masked or caped "good guys"'.[28] Although Parham's assessment is certainly true, the solace that readers take from the heroics of Batman and Superman goes beyond the simple assurance that good will triumph over evil. These heroes serve as metaphors of the human internal struggle between light and darkness, good and evil. They function to assure us that we can triumph over our own darker impulses even as they remind us that the battle never ends as long as we reside in human flesh. Superman does this as one who stands outside of us; Batman as one who belongs among us.

In 2007 DC Comics published issue #666 of both *Batman* and *Superman*. Given the obvious reference to the number of the beast in Revelation 13, it took the opportunity to tell their stories using concepts and imagery associated with Revelation. Although this approach could easily have come across as nothing more than a cheap gimmick, it resulted in stories that illustrate well the mixture of apocalyptic and superhero mythology. Both issues examine the same topic that is a hallmark of apocalyptic thought—the dualism of opposing forces—while contextualizing that dualism within the postmodern interest in moral ambiguity. However, since Batman and Superman represent different metaphors of humanity, they engage the topic in nuanced ways.

Batman issue #666 is titled 'Bethlehem',[29] a nod to the poem 'The Second Coming' by William Butler Yeats. The poem describes the coming of the

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25. Ken Schenck, 'Superman: A Popular Culture Messiah', in B.J. Oropeza (ed.), *The Gospel according to Superheroes*, pp. 33-48 (44).

26. C.K. Robertson, 'The True *Übermensch*: Batman as Humanistic Myth', in B.J. Oropeza (ed.), *The Gospel according to Superheroes*, pp. 49-65 (61).

27. Robertson, 'The True *Übermensch*', p. 61.

28. Thom Parham, 'Superheroes in Crisis: Postmodern Deconstruction and Reconstruction in Comic Books and Graphic Novels', in B.J. Oropeza (ed.), *The Gospel According to Superheroes*, pp. 197-214 (210).

29. Collected in Grant Morrison and Andy Kubert, *Batman and Son* (New York: DC Comics, 2007). All references to the comic are from this volume and so will be identified by the page number on which they occur.

Antichrist, depicted as a 'rough beast' slouching toward Bethlehem. Likewise, *Batman* #666 details the arrival of the Antichrist in Gotham City. Set in a future version of Gotham City, the son of Batman, Damian Wayne, has taken over his father's mantle. He was raised by the League of Assassins to become an enemy of Batman, but rebelled and chose his father's path instead. Damian Wayne is thus a character who has walked in both worlds and so, even more than his father, finds himself walking the line between good and evil. He hints at this when he refers to Gotham as 'Bethlehem, where the forces of darkness meet the forces of light'.[30]

Forcing him to face these dual impulses of light and darkness within himself is the arrival in Gotham of one who claims to be the son of Satan, calls himself the Antichrist and announces Armageddon. When Batman notices this figure's handiwork in a series of murders in the city, he states, 'The dragon of Revelations [*sic*] shows his stupid face after all these years.'[31] Yet Damian Wayne's familiarity with that face may be more than he realizes. Since the 'Antichrist' appears on the scene dressed as Batman but with glowing red eyes, he represents not so much an Antichrist but an Anti-Batman. He is a warped and evil version of Batman. He is what Damian Wayne could become if he were to embrace the darkness within himself.

Therefore, when Batman faces off against this Anti-Batman, he really fights against his own potential for evil. Throughout the issue, Damian Wayne struggles with his propensity to cross the moral line. He confesses, 'I knew I'd never be as good as my Dad or Dick Grayson . . . so I specialized in cheating.'[32] He reveals a conflicted attitude toward violence and oppression when he tells a group of innocent bystanders, 'Go and make the world a better place or I'll hunt you down one by one.'[33] Despite having promised his father that he would never kill, he breaks that vow when the need arises. Consequently, when Damian Wayne kills the Antichrist/Anti-Batman, one wonders if good has really triumphed over evil. The hero has won the battle against his dark opposite, but has he won the battle against the darkness in himself? The final scene of the issue shows Damian Wayne standing triumphantly as Batman, covered in the blood of his adversary, and announcing to the world, 'The Apocalypse is canceled. Until *I* say so.'[34] With these words, he both announces the defeat of evil by good and hints that the victory may be temporary. In fact, by stating that the apocalypse is canceled only until *he* says so, Batman hints at a recognition of his own potential for evil—that one day he himself might initiate an apocalypse. It is the statement of a vigilante

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30. *Batman and Son*, 184.
31. *Batman and Son*, 189.
32. *Batman and Son*, 196.
33. *Batman and Son*, 199.
34. *Batman and Son*, 200.

who walks a fine line between justice and criminality and is not sure on which side he will ultimately end up. As a humanistic myth that suggests human beings can better themselves, yet set in an apocalyptic context in which everything is falling apart, *Batman* #666 is a reminder that the human potential for goodness and light must never let its guard down in the face of darkness lest it be consumed by it.

Like *Batman* #666, *Superman* #666 also employs apocalyptic imagery to address the duality of good and evil within humanity. Superman, as transcendent savior figure, is 'the apocalyptic hero par excellence'.[35] He is god-like not just in power but in virtue as well. Though not technically human, he represents the best of humanity. *Superman* #666, titled 'The Beast from Krypton', raises the question of whether he conversely has the potential to become the worst of humanity—the Beast of Revelation.

The issue's title, 'The Beast from Krypton', contains dual meaning. Rakkar, a demon from Krypton's version of hell, survived that planet's destruction and arrives on Earth with the intention of corrupting Superman. Rakkar contends that Superman once killed a man—an act Superman denies—and that that abuse of Superman's power allowed Rakkar entry into his soul. Rakkar's quest to corrupt Superman raises the question of which character will prove itself to be the true 'Beast from Krypton'.

Clark Kent falls asleep and dreams of a world in which he has fully embraced his status as a god, rendered in imagery from Revelation 13. In one scene Superman sits on a giant throne (Rev. 13.2) as the world burns around him. Worshippers gather around his throne (Rev. 13.4) and shout out with language both reverent ("Praise Superman!' 'Glory to Superman!') and petitionary ('Let it rain! An hour's rain!' 'Show mercy! A scrap of food!').[36] Superman, however, ignores their pleas. Then, the scene shifts to a marketplace. Just as in Rev. 13.16-17, in which people can neither buy nor sell unless they possess the mark of the beast, individuals in the marketplace carry coins with Superman's logo on them and bear his mark on their foreheads. Superman then embarks on a violent and destructive rampage, killing both Lex Luthor and Jimmy Olsen. Deciding that humanity is beneath him, he renounces his own alter ego, declaring, 'No more of that grinning oaf, Kent. No more typing drivel about dog shows and pot holes.'[37] Then, as if to destroy all remnants of his humanity, Superman goes to Smallville, his hometown, and burns it to the ground.

Superman #666 examines power as a corrupting force. What has always kept Superman's power in check was his link to humanity. Once those in

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35. Stanley Cohen, 'Messianic Motifs, American Popular Culture and the Judaeo-Christian Tradition', *Journal of Religious Studies* 8 (1980), pp. 24-34 (31).

36. *Superman* #666, p. 10.

37. *Superman* #666, p. 26.

power set themselves above others and begin to view themselves through the lens of privilege, that power can become like a cancer that devours the soul. It is only as Superman abuses his power by exalting himself above humanity and severing all ties to Clark Kent that he becomes corrupted, that he becomes in the words of Rakkar, 'The beast they await! Seven heads! Ten horns. Tail of a dragon, talons of a bear!' (Rev. 13.1-2).[38] When Superman physically turns into this very beast, it appears that he has lost the battle, that the dark side of human nature has triumphed. Yet Superman then erupts from within the beast, destroying it from the inside—a metaphor for the internal nature of the battle. This is possible because the Phantom Stranger, aware of the coming threat, had divided Superman's soul, creating an easily corruptible outer shell while leaving Superman's true soul uncorrupted within.

The final scenes of the issue highlight the humanistic focus of the issue's apocalyptic scenario. Upon defeating Rakkar, Superman appears before the lords of hell and threatens to destroy them. They respond by pointing out that 'as long as there is darkness in the human heart, as long as there is greed or hatred or anger, we will endure.'[39] These words haunt Superman as he later begins to wonder whether in fact he has ever killed anyone, as Rakkar had suggested. Could the darkness in the human heart one day get the better of him? As Superman expresses this moment of doubt, the scene cuts to hell, where the dead body of Rakkar suddenly opens an eye. Superman's doubt about his own inherent goodness sustains the demon and gives it life, hinting that he is potentially as corruptible as any human being. With this final image, the issue ends, but it does so by replacing the standard concluding phrase of 'The End' with the more appropriate and provocative word, 'Neverending'. With this word, *Superman* #666 suggests that the apocalyptic struggle between light and darkness, as played out within the human heart, is a battle without finality because the fight against humanity's darker nature will persist as long as humanity persists.

Hope often appears as a hallmark of apocalyptic thought. In many postmodern apocalyptic narratives, such as those represented by *Batman* #666 and *Superman* #666, that hope becomes mingled with doubt and ambiguity. Each of these issues portrays Batman and Superman prevailing over their darker foes, both external and internal, while at the same time hinting to readers that the next battle may not conclude so favorably. These heroes inspire readers to believe that hope for victory remains, that the fight for goodness is virtuous and noble; yet they also caution vigilance lest one mistake victory in a single battle with victory in a war that never ends.

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38. *Superman* #666, p. 40.
39. *Superman* #666, p. 44.

X-Men: Age of Apocalypse

In *Spawn: The Armageddon Collection*, *Batman* #666, and *Superman* #666, the conflict between the competing impulses of creation and destruction plays out on an individual level. The hero wages a war within himself to overcome his own propensity toward destruction. This internal battle, represented metaphorically and mythologically on an external level as a battle against the forces of heaven and hell, against the Antichrist, or against a beast from Krypton, represents the natural state of conflict within the human soul. With *X-Men: Age of Apocalypse*, these same themes persist, but the stage on which they play out moves from the personal to the societal. The *X-Men* series has always served as a thinly veiled metaphor for racism with its exploration of bigotry and prejudice between humans. *Age of Apocalypse* situates that metaphor in an apocalyptic context as a means of heightening the tension and demonstrating what is ultimately at stake in the battle for racial equality.

X-Men: Age of Apocalypse is a crossover storyline that began in 1995 and ran for approximately ten years.[40] The story takes place in an alternate universe in which Charles Xavier is dead and Magneto leads the X-Men. The figure known as Apocalypse launches an invasion of the Earth with the intention of subduing humanity and claiming the world for mutants loyal to himself. Humanity quickly loses the initial battle as Apocalypse takes over North America. Imagery borrowed from the book of Revelation suggests that this invasion will eventually lead to the final battle of Armageddon. Apocalypse's conquest of the world is aided by his advance guard, the Horsemen (Rev. 6.1-8) and his covert strike team, the Pale Riders (Rev. 6.8). Those left alive in North America are forced to live through a sort of tribulation period as the land lies in ruins and survival is a constant struggle. Apocalypse himself comes to resemble the beast of Revelation as he sits on a throne and decrees that the whole world bow to him (Rev. 13.2-4).

Apocalyptic scenarios often revolve around the theme of destruction as they confront us with images of the full force of humanity's corruption. Many modern apocalyptic conceptions depict the end of human society at our own hands whether through nuclear warfare, man-made ecological catastrophe, bio-terrorism or the unintended consequences of unchecked scientific advancement. In *X-Men: Age of Apocalypse*, the self-destructive tendencies of human society are encapsulated within the central conceit of the X-Men mythology concerning racism and prejudice. In fact, with respect to the racial divide, mutants represent both sides of the aisle. They are at the same time the oppressed minority who are ostracized and hated and the racial oppressors, as many of them use their enhanced power to subjugate humans whom

40. The full series is collected in *X-Men: Age of Apocalypse, The Complete Epic*, Books 1-4 (New York: Marvel, 2005-2006).

they view as an inferior race. They reveal their belief in their own racial superiority by claiming the self-designation of Homo Superior.

Age of Apocalypse suggests that if such attitudes of racial superiority and prejudice persist, then the pattern of societal self-destruction will continually repeat itself. This is represented in the abundant use of Holocaust imagery in the series. The figure of Apocalypse is a metaphorical Hitler who launches a campaign of genetic cleansing because of his belief in the inherent superiority of mutant-kind. He herds human beings into concentration camps and decrees that all of the weaker mutants are to be culled in a survival-of-the-fittest approach, which he calls 'The first law of Apocalypse'. Furthermore, select mutants are held for experimental testing performed by Dr Hank McCoy in his persona as The Beast. Dr Hank McCoy represents a type of Dr Mengele, who performed cruel and unorthodox experiments on the residents of the German concentration camps. Thus, presenting Dr McCoy in his Beast persona suggests that individuals like Dr Mengele are in reality monsters in human form.

As a real event of history, the Holocaust is a constant reminder of the human potential for evil and destruction. Yet the Holocaust is also a mythological event insofar as it serves as a paradigmatic representation of the institutionalization of evil around illusions of racial superiority and strength. As *mythological* event, the Holocaust can be re-presented in new ways and forms in order to highlight the dark side of human society. By placing its story of racism, hatred and genetic cleansing in the context of an apocalyptic threat to the world, *X-Men: Age of Apocalypse* suggests that when such ideas go unopposed, they inevitably lead to the breakdown and self-destruction of a society.

Charles Gannon contrasts apocalyptic attitudes in Britain and the United States with respect to nuclear war and societal self-destruction. He argues that the British characteristically avoid the narrative depiction of nuclear war in their films as though wishing to avoid confronting the issue, while 'the American tendency to approach—and reapproach—images of Armageddon is pronounced and unsettling'.[41] He further suggests that this obsession with nuclear self-destruction is not merely sensationalism but serves the rhetorical goal of providing 'catharsis or even "psychological prophylaxis"' against the fear of annihilation.[42] While not disputing that conclusion, I suggest that if narrative depictions of Armageddon and world destruction function only to dampen fear and anxiety about the future, then they are not truly apocalyptic. Genuine apocalyptic is as much about creation as it is about destruction.

41. Charles E. Gannon, 'Silo Psychosis: Diagnosing America's Nuclear Anxieties through Narrative Imagery', in David Seed (ed.), *Imagining Apocalypse: Studies in Cultural Crisis* (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 103-17 (104).

42. Gannon, 'Silo Psychosis', p. 106.

Rather than merely lessening fear about the future, it instills hope and a sense of concrete possibility about the future.

Krishan Kumar observes that today's doomsday scenarios have largely ignored this vital aspect of apocalyptic mythology because they have been stripped of any sense of conflict.[43] Because the end is seen as arising through natural means (ecological disaster, population explosion, meteor strike, etc.), conflict becomes less of an issue. Yet, conflict is essential to an understanding of apocalyptic thought. Without a conflict between opposing forces, one serving the cause of destruction and the other the cause of creation, apocalyptic narratives lose their ability to motivate individuals to fight for a better future. Such narratives resemble a comic book devoid of either hero or villain. It is in the fight against opposition and in the belief that the agents of creation will emerge victorious, even if that means clawing themselves out of the ruins, that apocalyptic narratives instill a sense of hope. This is precisely why the metaphor of warfare dominates the book of Revelation. The basis of Christian hope in Revelation is that those who 'overcome' the opposition, by fighting with the weapons of faithfulness and endurance, will share in the blessings of new creation.

Both comic books and apocalyptic narratives embrace mythological conflict between order and chaos, good and evil, creation and destruction, hero and villain as the very thing that dictates the outcome of the future. Hope is born out of conflict. The X-Men represent the resistance movement against Apocalypse and his oppressing hordes, yet they also represent our societal conscience. What they fight for is a 'better tomorrow' and the hope 'that all people should live together without oppression, or bigotry, or hatred'.[44] The mythological function of the Holocaust in this series is to expose the fallacy of a superior race and the concept of survival of the fittest as applied to racial divides. It is fitting that this sentiment comes from Magneto, himself a Holocaust survivor, as he challenges Apocalypse by stating, 'As a child, I heard the very same babble from a Berlin house-painter . . . a madman whose Aryan Race tried to wipe out all it deemed "dirty" or "impure". And do you remember who won the war he began? The "weak" . . . who rose in righteous triumph.'[45] With these words, Magneto suggests that the creative impulse of

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43. Krishan Kumar, 'Apocalypse, Millennium and Utopia Today', in Malcolm Bull (ed.), *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 200-224 (205). In similar fashion, Oropeza ('Introduction', pp. 8-9) argues that the restoration of paradise can come only through a climactic battle.

44. *X-Man #4*, collected in *X-Men: Age of Apocalypse, The Complete Epic*, Book 4 (New York: Marvel, 2006).

45. *X-Men Omega*, collected in *X-Men: Age of Apocalypse, The Complete Epic*, Book 4 (New York: Marvel, 2006).

human society, its impulse toward goodness and justice, will ultimately conquer over that which threatens it.

The series climaxes in the final battle, the battle of Armageddon, between Magneto with his X-Men and Apocalypse with his armies. The key to this battle, however, is Magneto's attempt to fix their world gone wrong by restoring it to its original timeline. Illyana, a little girl who is critical to the success of this task, questions whether this other world they seek to restore is any better than their current one. The character of Bishop replies that what makes this other world better is that it contains hope that the people in that world will not make the same mistakes of bowing to fear and prejudice. In this sense, the alternate world of *X-Men: Age of Apocalypse* functions in an opposite way to the symbolic world of Revelation, although with the same ultimate goal of instilling hope for the future. The symbolic world of Revelation depicts a world that is getting worse under the apparent rule of the dragon and the beast, but it suggests that such rule is a deception. It is the depiction of God truly ruling over his creation, despite the dragon's and beast's posturing to the contrary, that inspires hope. An encounter with the symbolic world of Revelation allows readers to function in their physical world with a sense of faith and confidence for the future. In *X-Men: Age of Apocalypse*, the alternate world does not try to depict the spiritual reality behind the veil, as Revelation's symbolic world does. Instead it presents a vision of what our world could become, symbolically speaking, if we as a society allowed prejudice and racism to dominate. This vision of a dystopian alternate world generates hope by implying that the vision can be avoided, that people can fight for a better future. So, after defeating Apocalypse and waiting for their alternate reality to revert back to its original timeline, Magneto states that the real legacy of Charles Xavier was the idea 'that any dream worth having . . . was a dream worth fighting for'.[46]

X-Men: Age of Apocalypse explores the dual impulses toward creation and destruction not within the individual human soul but within the soul of human society. It argues that human society has the potential for great evil and self-destruction when it condones prejudice, fear and hatred. Yet, human society also bears within it the seeds of a better future, but the hope of that future is dependent on its members' willingness to take a stand and fight for it.

Conclusion

Apocalyptic narratives and superhero narratives both offer perspective on life by getting us to view the normal through the lens of the divine, the human through the lens of the superhuman. When the contemporary superhero narrative combines with elements of ancient apocalyptic, that perspective often

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46. *X-Men Omega*, collected in *X-Men*, Book 4.

comes through exploration of the dualism of opposing forces culminating in a climactic and destructive end-time conflict. The examples presented in this essay all employ that structure to address the battle between light and darkness in the human soul and in human society. With *Spawn: The Armageddon Collection*, it manifests itself as an exploration of free will and the responsibility of humanity to overcome its own destructive tendencies in favor of the creative. For *Batman* #666 and *Superman* #666, the emphasis falls on the ongoing and 'neverending' nature of the struggle between good and evil within the human soul. In *X-Men: Age of Apocalypse*, that same internal struggle becomes magnified to a societal level with a treatise on how prejudice and bigotry tap into humanity's self-destructive side. The superheroes in these stories stand as a metaphor of the human struggle. They remind us that the battle between hero and villain is a personal one and one in which we all must choose a side.

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7. 'Now the whole world stands on the brink': Apocalypse and Eschatological Hope in Contemporary Superhero Comics

Greg Garrett

And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.

Rev. 6.8 (KJV)

Nothing less than the end of all that is!

Marv Wolfman and George Perez,
Crisis on Infinite Earths

The end of the world is coming; fold in familiar comic character and stir. Superhero comics would not be comics—at least in modern times—without the threat of world-ending villainy, cosmic disaster or extraterrestrial invasion. While comics have dealt with domestic violence, slum lords and bank robbers, and such street-level crime is an appropriate setting for some comics heroes, the narrative stakes were raised by the power levels of characters such as Superman and Green Lantern, the Fantastic Four and Thor. Why have a Norse God of Thunder, for example, and not wrestle with the doom of Ragnarok, the Norse legend of the end of the world? Or a hero who could move planets and travel through time, like Superman, and never offer cosmic-level events that threatened whole worlds—or all that is? Although street-level menaces were much closer to readers' actual experience, these were the stories that begged to be told—and that people begged to read—tales in which we face the specter of the end of the world.

Secular and religious visions of the eschaton—the world to come, often a world arrived at only through bloody struggle or apocalyptic disaster—pervade comics and our entire culture, and have in common, paradoxically, their common derivation from Christian apocalyptic thought. As John Gray notes,

'visions of Apocalypse have haunted Western life' since Jesus and his followers created a narrative about how 'sickness and death, famine and hunger, war and oppression would all cease to exist after a world-shaking battle in which the forces of evil would be utterly destroyed'.[1] Even those who do not consider themselves followers of Christ or who may actually be proponents of a political system rather than a religious belief system (Gray's book, for example, examines apocalyptic leanings in Soviet Communism, Nazism, and the George W. Bush administration) find themselves retelling the story of Christian apocalypse and, in some sense, living it out, so that secular attempts to remake the world or prevent a feared disaster join alongside religious attempts to predict, faithfully endure or even prompt the end of the world.

More influential even than the apocalyptic tenor of the general Christian narrative, however, is the book of Revelation, the final book in the Christian Testament and the Bible. The Revelation to John, as it is also sometimes called, or the Apocalypse, as it is in the original Greek, has pervaded fantasies, fears and hopes about approaching apocalypse and has become a meaning-making narrative for most of us in the West. As Jonathan Kirsch writes in a book with the grandiose but accurate subtitle *How the Most Controversial Book in the Bible Changed the Course of Western Civilization*, 'Revelation is always present, sometimes in plain sight and sometimes just beneath the surface.'[2] For two thousand years, the apocalyptic ideas communicated in Revelation have shaped the way we live, believe, vote and are entertained, even if, as Raymond Brown and many other biblical scholars argue, it has done so for the wrong reasons. Groups of Christians have always employed the book as a guide to the end of the world, assuming that John, the purported receiver of Revelation, was given prophetic knowledge of the future that he shared with his hearers—and now, readers—in coded symbolic language. But Brown notes that other Christians do not imagine that Revelation predicts the future except in the most general and faithful sense; Revelation has expressed for these believers 'an absolute conviction that God would triumph by saving those who remained loyal and by defeating the forces of evil'.[3] But the details of this triumph—the exact date, place and time of some apocalyptic moment—were not and could not be known.

Because of this disagreement over how to read Revelation and what it actually means, its status has always been somewhat suspect in the church. While it was accepted as an authoritative Christian text by Clement of Alexandria,

1. John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 2.

2. Jonathan Kirsch, *A History of the End of the World: How the Most Controversial Book in the Bible Changed the Course of Western Civilization* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), p. 5.

3. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), p. 773.

Tertullian and Irenaeus, among others, it has also been marginalized by many from that time to ours. Augustine, in *City of God*, spoke of how reading Revelation as a prediction of the future, as too many did, required believers to accept 'ridiculous fancies'.[4] Martin Luther included the book in his Bible, but he, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin chose not to base their teachings upon it. Calvin, for example, wrote commentaries on every canonical book in the Christian Testament *except* Revelation.

In our time, the book has often been scorned by Christians who oppose the futurist interpretation of modern biblical literalists, and a prophetic reading of Revelation has been debunked by those who understand Revelation to be allegorical and historical, rather than prophetic.[5] The scholarly consensus is that to read Revelation as anything other than a pastoral letter dealing with historical events is to misread it. Nonetheless, any discussion of the apocalyptic in the United States and in the West generally requires an acknowledgment that this method of misreading Revelation has filtered far and wide and shaped the way we view the world—even if, we insist, this is not the way we view the world.

In America, shaped as it has been by evangelical Christianity, a mainstream futurist interpretation of Revelation has led to a culture that is marked simultaneously by both apprehension and hope as it looks toward the future. American believers and the culture they have influenced with these beliefs assert that an actual moment is approaching when the cosmic battle between good and evil will be joined in cataclysmic fashion. This reading of the text has encouraged them to identify present or oncoming disasters that might fit their reading, and to link contemporary persons to the prophecy, particularly the so-called Antichrist (who has been, in my lifetime alone, identified with Michael Jackson, Pope John Paul II, Mikhail Gorbachev, Saddam Hussein and Barack Obama). Our popular culture channels Revelation in this fashion in artifact after artifact; as Nicholas Guyatt notes, anyone watching movies or reading about the End of Days will discover Revelation's influence.[6] Narrative elements such as the Antichrist, the mark of the Beast and the general tenor of cosmic cataclysm have appeared in books, television, movies and superhero comics and graphic novels. Perhaps because they do often partake

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4. Augustine, *City of God*, 20.7.719.

5. As M. Eugene Boring gently tries to explain, Revelation is a pastoral letter to Asian first-century Christians who were confronted by a religious and political difficulty from a Christian prophet who chose to use familiar [at least to him] apocalyptic symbols and stories. See Boring, *Revelation* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1989), p. 1.

6. Nicholas Guyatt, *Have a Nice Doomsday: Why Millions of Americans Are Looking Forward to the End of the World* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007), p. 69.

so strongly of plot lines about the apocalypse, these all are also examples of the pervasive influence of Revelation.

Take, for example, 'Blackest Night', DC Comics' high-profile apocalyptic event of 2009, which revolves around familiar characters from the Green Lantern mythos, the Guardians of the Universe. The Guardians' sacred tome, the Book of Oa, has a final frightening chapter of cryptic prophecy:

> A face of metal and flesh shall speak of the secrets of the 52.
> Fear will rise. Willpower will gather. And a wave of light will unleash the truth behind the power of the ring.[7]

These lines—like the abstruse symbols and creatures depicted in Revelation—are taken to be predictive of future events, and although (as of this writing) the event has not concluded, the narrative shows us that the Book of Oa clearly did predict the coming crisis. Just as people read Revelation as a record of what is to come and watch avidly for any sign of it, so too have the Guardians noted the signs—and now, they recognize, the apocalypse is here.

Will God (or godlike forces) use this cosmos-shaking event for good? Will humans manage to prevent it to avert their destruction? Much depends on the sort of apocalypse imagined, for comics have incorporated both successfully. Daniel Wojcik has written that religious apocalyptic affirms 'an orderly cosmos, the end of evil and suffering, the meaning of human life and the millennial realm of peace and justice'. Some secular apocalypses also employ these hopeful patterns, but Wojcik writes that in general, nonreligious apocalypses 'are devoid of the component of worldly redemption, and therefore tend to be characterized by a sense of hopelessness and despair'.[8] In many popular-culture narratives of the end of the world, one finds twin narrative impulses of the apocalyptic tale present. On the one hand, God or some other supernatural figure acts, 'human beings endure' faithfully, as Adele Yarbo Collins puts it, and the world is transformed, a sacred apocalypse. In other narratives, total annihilation awaits if this event cannot be prevented or somehow overcome through human activity, a secular apocalypse. [9] As such, the end of the world is not to be feared; the end of the world is a disaster to be averted. Sometimes these narratives fight it out from within the cover of the same comic.

Within familiar comic narratives, the latter (disaster to be averted) appears far more often than the former. One needs only to look, for example, at

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7. Geoff Johns and Ethan van Sciver, *Green Lantern Sinestro Corps Special* (August 2007, n.p.).

8. Daniel Wojcik, *The End of the World as We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America* (New York: NYU Press, 1997), p. 4

9. Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadephia: Westminster, 1984), p. 156.

the title of the recent "Annihilation" storyline from Marvel Comics to guess that it is not a tale of patient acquiescence to cosmic powers. No, like many superhero comics, it is a story of all-out battle to prevent the 'end of all that is' (in Marv Wolfman's memorable catchphrase from the apocalyptic DC event 'Crisis on Infinite Earths'), a tale of nonreligious apocalypse. In emphasizing this narrative impulse, it stands in good company, as many of the best-known story lines in comics history are about battles for the preservation of the world (or the cosmos): the Fantastic Four against Galactus, the Devourer of Worlds; the heroes of the DC universes against the Anti-Monitor in 'Crisis on Infinite Earths'; the X-Men against Dark Phoenix, an evil cosmic entity with the power to destroy entire galaxies; the DC heroes against Alexander Luthor in 'Infinite Crisis' to save reality itself. These traditional narratives preserve the notion of human agency, bravery and power—the idea that we can avert the end of the world if power and bravery are exercised rightly.

Joss Whedon and John Cassaday's *Astonishing X-Men* run is a best-selling recent illustration of many of these tropes of the secular apocalypse; a prophecy about the end of a world (not Earth) turns out to be, rather, an instruction manual on how the X-Man Colossus can destroy it. (Incidentally—and ironically—the prophecy actually brings him to the planet he is supposed to destroy—where, instead, he actually prevents its destruction.) Frightened by the prophecy, though, the people of the supposedly doomed planet not only attempt to destroy Colossus, but they also create a Doomsday weapon of their own, a giant bullet targeted at Earth, which is later fired with the intent to destroy our planet, presumably in revenge for the expected destruction of their own.

In *Giant-Sized Astonishing X-Men 1*, the final issue of the run, Spider-Man joins a spaceship full of other heroes, and as he looks around, his reaction is telling:

> 'Oh, this is never good.'
> 'You get this many big guns in one room not civilly warring, it's the end of the world, or . . .
> . . . I don't have an "or".'

And indeed, as an off-stage voice (perhaps Reed Richards of the Fantastic Four) then says in his best superheroese, 'Fellow heroes! We are all assembled. If we are to act, we must act in concert.'[10] Against cosmic disaster, the heroes will strive—and one, X-Man Kitty Pryde will succeed—in averting the end of the world, because of course, that's what superheroes do.

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10. Joss Whedon and John Cassaday, *Giant-Sized Astonishing X-Men 1* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2008).

But this triumph of human effort preserving the world comes at a cost, in human terms, that is still shattering. Pryde, one of the most popular of all Marvel heroes, is lost in space, perhaps never to be recovered; and so we simultaneously feel the emotions common to the nonreligious apocalypse—a sense of sadness undergirds even the heroic victory, and joy is tempered by grief and even cynicism. The world has been saved, but the world will never be the same.

In two of the most influential apocalyptic tales in comics, however, *Kingdom Come* and *Watchmen*, the heroic impulse to thwart a doomsday crisis—the secular apocalypse—is presented alongside the idea that a crisis may be a necessary and even a blessed event—the central concern of the religious apocalypse. DC's *Kingdom Come*, by Mark Waid and Alex Ross, features The Spectre, a Golden Age character said to be the embodiment of God's Justice (if generally justice of a very bloody Old Testament sort), opens with—and often returns to—verses from the book of Revelation concerning the end of the world and revolves around the mystical visions experienced by the central character of the story, minister Norman McKay, who is painted, incidentally, to resemble the minister father of illustrator Ross.

Again, the world stands on the brink; here, it is superhuman activity that threatens all there is. Faced with the growing savagery of a new generation of heroes, Superman and most of his cohorts have retired, pulling their power and influence out of a world that desperately needs them. The Spectre tells Norman McKay, 'The gods of yesterday no longer walk among the humans . . . Instead, cued by Superman's surrender, they journey apart.'[11] And without their stabilizing influence, the world is at the mercy of forces beyond its control.

Pastor McKay's guided tour of this status quo at the side of the Spectre leaves him deeply disturbed. 'You're an angel!' he tells the Spectre. 'That makes you a messenger of hope! . . . A greater power sent you! Your very existence is a testimony to faith! You mean that all you have to tell me is that those who could save us won't?'[12]

Is the world truly abandoned by God—and by the gods of justice? Are Norman's visions of apocalypse to come true? As the notes to *Kingdom Come* indicate, 'Since our world is one of shattered faith where gods walk the streets and throw buses at one another, McKay has been shaken from most everything in which he once believed.'[13] It is in the land of despair where we begin most such tales. But in the course of the story, the main characters—Norman McKay, Superman, and others—regain their faith and sense of purpose. It's not that people don't get killed, that destruction on a massive scale doesn't

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11. Mark Waid and Alex Ross, *Kingdom Come* (New York: DC Comics, 1997), p. 44.
12. Waid and Ross, *Kingdom Come*, p. 49.
13. Waid and Ross, *Kingdom Come*, p. 215.

take place, that in a sense, the world doesn't end. All of those things take place. It's just that all of those events happen for a reason—which is how the narrative of religious apocalyptic literature functions. At the end of the story, good and order have been restored, the world has moved into a new phase of peace and justice, and the characters—and maybe even we readers—have been transformed.

Norman McKay asks the Spectre at one particularly difficult point in the action why he cannot simply intervene and the Spectre assures him, 'There will be a reckoning, Norman McKay. Be prepared. As the scriptures say, "Fear God, and give glory to him, for the hour of his judgment has come."'[14] At the heart of religious apocalyptic literature lies the sense that there is a plan, that all is going as it is supposed to, that somebody knows what's going on even if it looks to the casual bystander as if all is lost. Val J. Sauer, Jr, eloquently sums up the appeal of thinking eschatologically from a faith perspective:

> Faced with the possibility of an atomic war, the reality of death, and the threat of ecological disaster, biblical eschatology assures the Christian that a loving God has not abandoned his creation. Creation and redemption, the beginning and end of history, are acts of God. Biblical eschatology declares that history is moving toward an ultimate goal, the redemption of creation.[15]

It's this sort of redemptive eschatology we find working in *Kingdom Come*: the divine plan works out, even though the world ends. Superman learns that he can't turn his back on the human side of himself; Norman McKay recovers his faith, and discovers there is something he can do: He can give people hope. This marks *Kingdom Come* as a sure example of religious apocalyptic; not only do we want to believe that there is a plan for things, but we want to believe that it is a plan that anticipates a better future. As Jan Quinby points out, 'What makes living with apocalyptic belief tolerable for so many is its accompanying millennial dream, the current of hope that promises the fullness of Truth unveiled.'[16] After the end of the world, what emerges must be worth enduring such disaster, and so it is here. *Kingdom Come* ends as it began, with Norman McKay standing in front of his congregation and preaching again from the book of Revelation, but much has changed as a result of the events of the story. Now McKay preaches a new message, a message of hope gained from his time spent witnessing the apocalypses alongside the Spectre. His new message is, 'That a dream is not always a prophecy. That

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14. *Kingdom Come* (New York: DC Comics, 1997), p. 163.
15. Val J. Sauer, Jr, *The Eschatology Handbook* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), pp. viii-ix.
16. Jan Quinby, *Millennial Seduction: A Skeptic Confronts Apocalyptic Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 3.

the future, like so much else, is open to interpretation. And that hope is brightest when it dawns from fear.'[17]

Hope is a necessary response, but it is not, in and of itself, sufficient. 'Because hope is much more than a mood', says theologian John Polkinghorne, 'it involves a commitment to action. Its moral character implies that what we hope for should be what we are prepared to work for and so bring about.'[18] The book of Revelation can give both a sense of impending doom, which it lends to *Kingdom Come* at the outset of the book, and a message of comfort, as it does at the end. But what remains to make the world right is human action.

Watchmen, by English writer Alan Moore and English artist Dave Gibbons, also interweaves this sense of beneficial apocalypse with the necessity of action. Few people who study popular culture would dispute that *Watchmen* is one of the landmark works of sequential art. Awarded an Eisner award in 1988 and later named by *Time* magazine as one of the one hundred best novels published during *Time*'s history, it remains, twenty years after its publication, just as satisfying as—if perhaps less shocking than—when it was first released. Moore's startling revisionist take on superheroes plants them squarely in a time and place where end-of-the-world scenarios were easy to entertain, the 1980s America of Ronald Reagan, who once joked about declaring nuclear war on Russia over a live microphone. Instead of Reagan, however, Moore has played with history to return Richard Nixon to the Oval Office, and paid homage to the long history of comics by acknowledging that once there were groups of crime fighters in America who have since been disbanded by anti-vigilante laws, all except for government operatives. The Comedian—killed in the first pages of the book—the super-powered Dr Manhattan, and, still illegally fighting the good fight, the unrepentant vigilante Rorshach. Observing the anti-vigilante laws, apparently, are the Nite Owl, the Silk Spectre, and Ozymandias, former associates of the three still-active characters.

From its very first frames, the mood of *Watchmen* is one of tangible despair and fear; except for Dr Manhattan—so powerful that he can alter human history, but also so powerful that he has little interest in human history—there seems to be nothing standing between the world and imminent nuclear destruction as the United States and Russia stand toe to toe, posturing over the country of Afghanistan. Just as the later *Kingdom Come* will begin with prophecy, Rorshach writes in his journal at the outset, 'Now the whole world stands on the brink, staring down into bloody Hell', and although Rorshach

17. Waid and Ross, *Kingdom Come*, p. 203.
18. John Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope and the End of the World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 47-48.

is no advertisement for sanity, he speaks for many of the other characters we encounter in the book, major and minor. Rorshach may be the paranoid prophet of Judgment Day, but Judgment Day is coming nonetheless. When he tells us, 'Soon there will be war. Millions will burn. Millions will perish in sickness and misery', we have no reason to disbelieve him.[19]

Dave Gibbon's art speaks as loudly as the dialogue about the impending doom, peppered as it is with startling images: a yellow happy face button with a disturbing crimson splatter of blood on it; the three-triangled radiation danger symbol; a clock with its hands approaching midnight; entwined lovers who appear as shadows on a wall—or as skeletons; an atomic mushroom cloud. While the vast majority of the book is forcefully restrained, structured as it is around variations on a nine-panel layout, in the last chapter of *Watchmen*, as the catastrophe occurs, we see the first full-panel drawings. In those six full-page drawings, we are invited—forced, in fact—to witness the horrifying destruction of half of New York City, the apocalypse we've been rushing toward with anticipation and dread throughout the book. Bodies overflow from Madison Square Garden (where a band called Pale Horse is on the bill with Krystalnacht) and from the Utopia Theater (where *The Day the Earth Stood Still* was screening), and minor characters we have followed throughout the series lie dead, bloody and steaming in the streets.

The architect of New York City's destruction is not some super-villain, Russia or some cosmic force. Instead it is a superman, Ozymandias, once a crime fighter and still the world's smartest, most physically advanced human being. It is he who in the opening action murders the Comedian, he who hatches the plan to have Dr Manhattan exiled, and he who kills millions in New York City with his elaborate hoax of an alien invasion—all simply part of his overarching plan to save the world from impending nuclear destruction by seemingly threatening it with destruction. In weaving Ozymandias's plot to save the world, Alan Moore plays wonderfully with our received notions of apocalypse—especially the concept of the beneficial plan of the religious apocalypse. Adele Yarbro Collins writes that the purpose of the book of Revelation was to 'overcome the unbearable tension between what was and what ought to have been', to create unbearable tension and then to resolve it in an 'act of literary imagination'.[20] This is precisely what Ozymandias has done in *Watchmen*: by ratcheting up tension past the breaking point, he creates a literary fiction of apocalypse that paradoxically resolves apocalypse. Millions die, it is true—but billions more are saved, and the survivors believe themselves to be truly blessed. Because of the more intense terror they feel at the supposed alien incursion, Russia pulls out of Afghanistan and agrees to work

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19. Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, 'Chapter One', *Watchmen* (New York: DC Comics, 1987), pp. 1, 24.
20. Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, p. 141.

with America in making peace so that the two nations can work together to repulse any further attacks from beyond.

Ozymandias has saved the world, and everyone who knows the truth—even though they may have tremendous reservations—agrees to be silent. What Ozymandias tells those he exhorts to silence is true of much of religious apocalyptic literature, a sense that something good will necessarily follow the Judgment Day: 'I saved Earth from Hell. Next, I'll help her toward Utopia.[21]' It isn't a new heaven and a new earth, precisely, but Ozymandias is suggesting that the emerging world will look different from the past, and his assertion may have some truth to it, a central truth of the religious apocalypse if still mixed, we must admit, with some of the cynicism than comes from knowing its true genesis and human cost.

The major characters of the book scatter after their encounter with Ozymandias. Following the apocalypse in *Watchmen*, Nite Owl and Silk Spectre find comfort—and meaning—in human love and connection. Dr Manhattan departs for the stars, content to leave Earth as it is. But Rorschach will not—and cannot—buy into these solutions. One of the central ironies of *Watchmen* is that this pathetic little man also has an unbending sense of right and wrong, and while it is often misguided, there is something admirable about his credo: 'There is good and there is evil, and evil must be punished. Even in the face of Armageddon I shall not compromise in this.'[22] Perhaps Ozymandias's solution is a pragmatic good, but to Rorshach, it looks like cold-blooded murder nonetheless. As the book's title suggests, an ultimate concern of the narrative is, Who will watch the watchmen? Ultimately, Rorschach does; and although his body is destroyed by the god-like Dr Manhattan in order to preserve the illusion Ozymandias has created, his words (in the diary he has kept throughout) live on. At the book's end, we are left with the sense that thanks to Rorschach's diary, perhaps Ozymandias's machinations will be exposed after all.

This is what ultimately makes both *Watchmen* and *Kingdom Come* such powerful human tales of apocalypse; even against the cosmic scale of events common to religious apocalyptic tales, both make us believe that human action—and interestingly in both books, human words—still matter. Norman McKay's preaching shares the new sense of joy, mission and hope he's gained through his faithful witness of catastrophe, and Rorshach's words may alter the course of history after he is dead and gone. Unlike stories of cosmic Armageddon in which forces of cosmic good and evil strive high above our heads—or in distant galaxies—these stories encourage us to believe that even

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21. Moore and Gibbons, 'Chapter 12', *Watchmen* (New York: DC Comics, 1987), p. 20.
22. Moore and Gibbons, 'Chapter 12', *Watchmen*, 20.

in the face of the end of all that is, we can influence events, we can believe and we can act.

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