

Super-heroic virtue encounters cave of darkness

This summer, many people are comparing the myth of Superman with the life of Christ. The new Superman film, *Man of Steel*, invokes the parallels.

But it would be a mistake to think that the filmmakers are offering the Superman story as a substitute for Christianity. Instead, the movie is best seen as depicting what any Christian striving to live a life of super-heroic virtue, by modeling their life on Christ, can expect to encounter: namely, opposition from a world mired in darkness.

Clark Kent says in the film: “My father believed that if the world found out who I really was, they’d reject me, out of fear. He was convinced that the world wasn’t ready. What do you think?”

Clark learns that his real name is Kal-El and that he has a father Jor-El from beyond this world, a father who entrusts to him a mission involving the salvation of this world. True, that much of the story clearly parallels the vocation of any Christian, since it obviously resembles the life of Christ himself.

But the movie also alludes to the story of the Cave, as told by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato. In the film, the young Clark



Kent is shown reading Plato when he is picked on by school bullies. Plato tells the story of the Cave, in which prisoners are shackled down inside a dark Cave. They spend their days watching shadowy images projected on the Cave wall.

The story is meant as a satire of society, because it ridicules the stupidity of the cares of this world. The Cave-dwellers award prizes to whomever is best at guessing what shadowy shape will next be seen dancing on the Cave wall. Plato is satirizing the political process, in which leaders most often come to power by anticipating and flattering the dark desires of the populace.

But the Cave story also works well today as an allegory about technology. Anyone enslaved by smartphones and the Internet, or by the celebrity culture of the entertainment industry, is also captivated by “shadows on the wall of the Cave,” in Plato’s memorable image.

In Plato’s myth, one Cave-dweller escapes. He ascends from the Cave. He

exits out into the sunlight. Outside, he sees and understands the wonderful world of nature, illuminated in all its glory by the light of the true Sun. He has escaped the darkness of the Cave-society.

When this prisoner, who has seen the light, returns to the Cave, he is rejected and ridiculed. The other prisoners prefer to live by the dim firelight that projects the shadows onto the wall of the Cave. They do not trust his reports of the dazzling reality of the Sun beyond the Cave.

Plato’s theme is echoed in the *Man of Steel* movie. Its iconic movie poster, an image of Superman willingly handcuffed, sums it all up in one stunning image: The enlightened hero willingly returns into the darkness of the Cave, a world of chains, in order to bring his message of light.

Superman’s father Jor-El says in the film, “You will give the people an ideal to strive towards. They will race behind you; they will stumble; they will fall. But in time, they will join you in the sun. In time, you will help them accomplish wonders.”

The reference to the sun here is clearly another fine example of how the filmmakers deliberately invoke

the Platonic imagery of the Cave myth. Further, in one particularly effective sequence, we see Superman engaged in an epic struggle, stretching out his hand towards the light of the sun.

Like Plato’s enlightened soul who returns to the



**In time,
you will help them
accomplish wonders.**

– Jor-El

Cave, the Irish statesman Edmund Burke has also drawn the enlightened conclusion about what it is that keeps society in darkness and servitude: “Men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.”

Any utopian Republic is thus, like the planet Krypton, a thought experiment destined to fail. What really matters is learning how to order one’s soul to achieve true liberty.

Thus, the real “steel” in the *Man of Steel* is his moral fibre. Moral fibre is what superheroes show to the world as their message of light.

Clark Kent thus grows up to be a man of justice only because the family that raised him on earth taught him how to control his passions.

They also taught him to be very careful about the world. They knew how it would respond to anyone in

their midst who possesses super-heroic virtue. Clark’s parents on Earth thus show how, like Burke, they possess a Platonic political wisdom.

Similarly, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI once reflected on Jesus’ Crucifixion using the myths of Plato. Back in 1968, he wrote in his book *Introduction to Christianity*:

“The Cross is revelation. It reveals, not any particular thing, but God and man. It reveals who God is and in what way man is. There is a curious presentiment of this situation in Greek philosophy: Plato’s image of the crucified ‘just man.’ In the

Republic the great philosopher asks what is likely to be the position of a completely just man in this world. He comes to the conclusion that a man’s righteousness is only complete and guaranteed when he takes on the appearance of unrighteousness, for only then is it clear that he does not follow the opinion of men but pursues justice only for its own sake. So according to Plato the truly just man must be misunderstood and persecuted in this world; indeed Plato goes so far as to write: ‘They will say that our just man will be scourged, racked, fettered, will have his eyes burned out, and at last, after all manner of suffering, will be crucified.’ This passage, written four hundred years before Christ, is always bound to move a Christian deeply.”

So too, when a movie myth brings us back some light and projects it onto the dark wall, we can be truly moved – but only if we can catch a glimpse of our mission. We too can be men of steel, as we live our daily life, here on the planet that Plato famously likened to a dark Cave.

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