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Miles' "Superheroes can't save you: Epic examples of historic heresies" (critical book review)

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Critical Reviews



Miles, T. (2018). *Superheroes can't save you: Epic examples of historic heresies*. Nashville, TN: B&H Academic. 194 pp. \$19.99. ISBN 9781462750795

Todd Miles is professor of theology and director of the Master of Theology program at Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon. This is his second theology book. In *Superheroes can't save you*, Dr. Miles discusses two of his passions, Christology and comic books. The author writes seven chapters in his book that illustrates a heresy about Jesus Christ by comparing them to mainstream superhero characters. In his introduction he says, “every bad idea about Jesus can be illustrated by a superhero” (p. 5). Each chapter describes the heresy, who practices the heresy in modern times, what the Bible says, and why is it important.

The first heresy that Miles evaluates is Docetism, which denies that Jesus was human. The author uses Superman to illustrate this idea. Superman appeared to be human even though he in fact was an alien from another planet who was nearly invulnerable. Docetism states that Jesus only appeared to be a man who wore a “human disguise” like Superman did to appear like Clark Kent (p. 13). Miles emphasizes through the chapter that Jesus did not appear to be human as some Gnostics believed. Jesus Christ was fully human as well as fully divine. According to the author this matters because if “Jesus is just ‘God in disguise,’ like Superman, we all stand hopelessly condemned” (p. 27). Miles argues that we need a Jesus who had human attributes, experienced human feelings, fought temptation, and could feel physical pain. If we have a Jesus who was essentially Superman, we do not truly have salvation.

Chapter two evaluates a heresy and superhero that is the exact opposite of Docetism and Superman. In this chapter, Miles examines both Liberalism and Batman. Many who advocate for liberalism claim that Jesus Christ was only a man but he was not supernatural. The author compares this theory to Batman who has many great skills but does not have any superpowers. He states that liberalism believes that Jesus has many wonderful traits and should be followed. However, like Batman, they believe that Jesus is just a human being (p. 31). Miles then goes on to explain the Jesus Seminar study of the historical Jesus. Miles states that Jesus must be divine in order to provide a perfect sacrifice. The blood of Jesus must have divine and human qualities (p. 50). This position is refuted with the conclusion that we must have a savior who is more than a good role model. A true messiah must be fully divine.

Many Christians may be familiar with the concept of modalism as is expressed in chapter three. Miles uses Antman as an example of modalism. In the comics, scientist Hank Pym shrinks himself and becomes the Antman. However, he also has taken other identities such as Giant Man and Yellowjacket. Miles explains that this is similar to modalism since proponents of that theory claim that God exists as Father, Son, and Spirit but only one at a time. The author compares this Antman illustration to the quaint illustration of God existing as various states of water, liquid, vapor, and ice (pp. 61-62). This illustration fails because water can be liquid, vapor, or ice, it cannot be water, liquid, and ice at the same time. Hank Pym cannot be Antman, Giant Man, and Yellowjacket at the same time. This illustration implies that God cannot be Father, Son and Spirit at the same time. He must be one and not the others. Miles proposes that according to the Bible, Christians need God to exist as three persons for prayer since Jesus instructs his followers to pray to the Father in Jesus' name. Paul also instructed Christians to pray "in the Spirit" (pp. 68-69). In addition, Miles also concludes that God is in three persons since Jesus submitted himself to the father and depended on the Holy Spirit (p. 70). If God was like Antman, then Christians could not be saved as it is presented in the New Testament.

Miles clarifies in chapter four that Jesus is the Son of God but he was not created by or born from God like the familiar Norse thunder god and Marvel comic book warrior, Thor. There was a time in Norse mythology (and Marvel Comics) that Thor did not exist. However, the Bible declares that there was never a time when the Son was not. This is contrary to what many might think of the Son, since there is the birth of Jesus account in the New Testament. Although it may be easy for people to think of the Son being created by the Father, that is not Christianity. When people say that Jesus was created by God and that he is a lesser god then they are promoting some form Arianism (p. 78). Jesus was not created. He is the author of all creation as it is stated in John 1:3. Miles states that Jesus cannot be the author of all creation and be a created being (p. 89). The only options are that Jesus is a lesser god or is fully God. And Christianity depends on Jesus being fully God.

Chapter five compares Adoptionism with Green Lantern. In this DC comic, Hal Jordan get his powers from an extraterrestrial ring. Adoptionism states that Jesus was a good, religious man that God bestowed upon with the power of God. This view holds strongly to the idea that God only exists as the Father. He is not Son or Spirit. Miles compares this with the Unitarian view today (pp. 104-105). Ultimately, this Green Lantern Jesus cannot save humanity because he is not fully divine, he is only a man. This Jesus is not able to defeat Death and Satan (pp. 118-119).

In chapter six, Miles explores Apollinarism. This heresy suggests that Jesus had a divine mind but human body. He equates this particular theology with the Hulk.

The Hulk is a character with a monster body but the mind of Bruce Banner. Jesus did not exist as a divine mind in a human body. Jesus' whole body was divine. He was not a partial Christ but a full Christ.

The final chapter deals with Eutychianism. This teaching asserts that Jesus is part man and part God. Adherents to this heresy have proposed that Jesus third being or "god-man" (p. 158). He uses Spiderman as an example for this theology since he is part man and spider. Jesus was not some mixture or hybrid of divine and human. Jesus Christ is a member of the Trinity, not a mutant.

Miles saturates his book in Scripture to make it clear how the Bible refers to Jesus Christ. He even explains the context of his citations in order to provide a precise explanation of the biblical content specific to Jesus Christ. Miles wants to keep his readers from unintentionally falling into heresy. The book is written from a soul winning centered perspective. The author emphasizes the true nature of Christ because he wants his readers to know who Christ truly is. In fact, the epilogue of his book contains a clear and concise gospel message with resources on finding churches.

The footnotes in this book give additional information about Bible verse translations, history, theology, and even the author explaining pop cultural references he makes as well as giving readers humorous information on his life. However, the book could have been improved as it suffers from the lack of research citations. Although, the author does cite a few primary and secondary sources, they are very scarce throughout the book. Miles' arguments would be strongly presented with more sources when he explained concepts and people that are not common knowledge. The author does not engage and use the proper sources in an effective manner. In addition, the book does not contain any kind of bibliography. Although this is published by the academic division of B&H, it is not very scholarly.

Many theology professors will likely find that many of the illustrations in this book to be beneficial for their classes. Many seminary students in the West would likely be at least familiar with many of these comic book characters. Although, the book itself may not serve as a sound textbook for a systematic theology class, portions of it could serve as supplementary reading. Each chapter includes study questions for personal reflection, group discussion, and additional Scripture reading. This

additional material could allow this book for use in a Bible study with children and young adults. Miles' work could serve as a great way to introduce these very dense and complicated heresies to young people. The book could also serve to inform laity on the various aspects of Christology. It could also help its readers think critically about the person of Christ so that they have a biblical understanding of who He is. However, use of this book for small groups and Bible studies should be cautioned since it might cause confusion to people who are not familiar with comic books.

Overall, this book produces great value in introducing essential concepts of Christology to its readers. Those who choose to read it will likely find it humorous and informative. Miles writes in a clear, engaging, and concise manner.

Reviewer

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