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## STEPPING OUT OF DIVINITY: TOM KING'S “ALL-TOO-HUMAN” BATMAN

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### Abstract

This paper focuses on American superhero comics – i.e. superadventures and their likeness to mythology. Our goal is to understand how subtle changes in the characterization of a superhero may make them more congruent with the present day morality and ideals of the society, even if a given character is willing to directly challenge that morality. Through a close reading of Batman #53, in which Bruce Wayne states that Batman is like a god and that he does not believe in him anymore – nor should the people of Gotham – we discuss the symbolic meaning of Bruce Wayne's phrase and the implications for the readers' understanding of who the Batman is and what he stands for. One of the main impacts of this characterization is that Batman ceases to be the “interventionist god” as he was portrayed in many stories in the last decades, and learns to embrace the frailty and limitations of the human condition.

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### Keywords

Comics; Superhero Comics; Superadventures; Revamp; DC Comics; Batman; Bruce Wayne; Myth; Mythology; Close Reading; Tom King



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## ЗА ПРЕДЕЛАМИ БОЖЕСТВЕННОГО: «СЛИШКОМ ЧЕЛОВЕЧЕСКИЙ» БЭТМЕН ТОМА КИНГА

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### Аннотация

Эта статья посвящена американским комиксам о супергероях (т.е. суперприключениях) и их сходству с мифологией. Наша цель - понять, как едва уловимые изменения в характеристиках супергероя могут привести их в большее соответствие с современной моралью и идеалами общества, несмотря на то, что данный персонаж готов открыто бросить вызов этой морали. Через пристальное прочтение выпуска Бэтмен № 53, в котором Брюс Уэйн заявляет, что Бэтмен подобен богу, а сам он больше не верит в него (как и не должны жители Готэма), мы обсуждаем символический смысл фразы Брюса Уэйна и ее влияние на понимание читателями того, кто такой Бэтмен и за что он борется. Одно из главных последствий такой характеристики состоит в том, что Бэтмен перестает быть "вмешивающимся Богом", как его изображали во многих историях последних десятилетий, и учится принимать хрупкость и пределы человеческого бытия.

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### Ключевые слова

Комиксы; Супергерои комиксов; Суперприключения; Ревамп; Издательство DC; Бэтмен; Брюс Уэйн; Миф; Мифология; Пристальное чтение; Том Кинг



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## INTRODUCTION

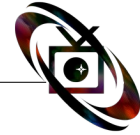
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In this article, we will analyze Bruce Wayne's statement about his "atheism" in relation to Batman and the acceptance of its fallibility and limitations in *Batman* #53, with script by Tom King and art by Lee Weeks (2018). Under a discussion of the mythical aspects of superhero comic books, we make a close reading of that issue, understanding that the "atheism" statement contradicts to the previous characterizations of the character – in which Batman's/Bruce Wayne's view of his role verged on that of an "interventionist" god, which was so prevalent that the *Kingdom Come* limited series features his totalitarian control over Gotham City (Waid & Ross, 1997; Klock 2013).

American superhero comics, especially the main line titles from DC Comics and Marvel Comics, are not just "superadventures" (Reblin 2012), i.e. narratives in which we follow great achievements made by beings with physical and intellectual capacities vastly superior to that of the ordinary human being, but also supernarratives that have been going on for at least six decades.

As pointed out by Douglas Wolk (2007), the superadventures by the two main American publishing houses that publish superheroes comics do not, in general, take place in a self-contained and self-referential way. Instead, they establish links – no matter how tenuous – with a given series featuring events that occurred in past editions of these series, other series of concomitant publication and even events narrated in stories published years or decades ago.

This narrative continuum of superadventures would thus demand the reader to become a super reader (Wolk 2007) capable of identifying the referentialities of the stories and also willing to investigate those elements cited that are not in the super reader's repertoire. This phenomenon is sometimes frowned upon and during the 1990s, for example, it was not uncommon to affirm the need to have an "x-PhD" to accompany the adventures of the X-Men (Assis 2008). One of the side effects of this is the difficulty of gaining new readers since there is a need to become a super reader in order to be able to effectively enjoy the narratives without a constant feeling of confusion. Even self-contained stories in limited series and graphic novels feature characters who have an extensive background, and even narratives that take place in other continuities – i.e. *Else-worlds* and *What If...?* stories – often refer to events of the main continuity, with which they establish a relationship of antithesis or complementation.



One of the possible editorial solutions to resolve this impasse is a reboot, i.e. the restart and consequent simplification of the whole continuity of the supernarrative, thus offering a point of entry for new readers (Proctor 2017, Guynes 2019). The procedure has been used three times by DC Comics in the past four decades, featuring as transition narratives the limited series *Crisis on Infinite Earths* [1985-1986], *Flashpoint* [2011] and *DC Rebirth* [2016]. Often after events such as these, the numbering of some – if not all – monthly superhero magazines is restarted from issue #1, which reinforces the invitation for new readers to join – an implicit message of facilitation, a safe haven for the arrival of newcomer readers (Kukkonen 2013). DC even held crossover events with more specific consequences for the continuation of the supernarrative, such as *Zero Hour* [1994]. Marvel Comics waded to this same measure on two occasions, from the events *Onslaught* [1996] and *Heroes Reborn* [1996-1997], in which characters from four series – *Captain America*, *Fantastic Four*, *Iron Man* and *The Avengers* – migrated to a different continuity, in which their stories were restarted without references to past events, and in *Ultimate Marvel* [2000-2015], which again presented a new continuity for some of its most famous characters, although without replacing them in the main continuity. The reboot of an entire continuum is a rather drastic measure that bothers loyal readers as much as it is appealing to novice readers – it has so far been avoided by Marvel Comics and, like the brief 5-year gap between *Flashpoint* and *DC Rebirth* seems to demonstrate, may have limited benefits or even have reached a point of exhaustion (Proctor 2017).

Another, more moderate way of offering points of entry to new readers is the revamp, i.e. the renewal of specific series, teams and characters – which can sometimes even run isolated from the rest of the supernarrative, although there are often points of convergence after few months or years of publication (Reblin 2012, Klock 2013). We can list three essential paths for the renovation of superheroes: the generational transition, the redesign of a character and the construction of new characterizations.

The generational transition is possibly the most evident of these procedures and has been present for a long time in the history of the publication of superheroes, as can be seen in the appearance of characters from the so-called Silver Age [approximately between the 1950s and 1980s]: the first Flash (Jay Garrick, created in 1940), Green Lantern (Alan Scott, created in 1940) and Human Torch (Jim Hammond, created in 1939) were reimagined from new incarnations in the characters Barry Allen (1956), Hal Jordan (1959) and Johnny Storm (1961). In all these three cases, the appearance of a new character did not initially establish any relationship



with the previous version, but although there was never any kind of narrative link between the two Human Torches, in the two pairs of characters from DC the old generation eventually came to play a mentoring role towards their heirs<sup>1</sup>.

The emergence of direct or indirect heirs after a given protagonist is killed, incapacitated or somehow abandoned the superhero cloak is a common procedure especially in DC Comics<sup>2</sup>, as can be seen in the different generations of Flashes (Barry Allen, Wally West, Bart Allen), Green Lanterns (Hal Jordan, John Stewart, Kyle Rayner), Batmans (Bruce Wayne, Jean-Paul Valley, Dick Grayson), Robins (Dick Grayson, Jason Todd, Tim Drake, Stephanie Brown, Damian Wayne), Supergirls (Kara Zor-El 1, Matrix / Mother, Linda Danvers, Kara Zor-El 2), Suberboys (Kal-El / Clark Kent, Kon-El / Conner Kent, Jonathan Kent), and Blue Beetles (Dan Garrett, Ted Kord, Jamie Reyes) in which characters were effectively substituted in the main continuity of the supernarrative, either temporarily or definitively, with short or long intervals between the end of one generation and the beginning of the next one<sup>3</sup>.

The second procedure consists of preserving the character, but with substantial transformations in the superhero's design, which is often not limited to changes in his or her uniform and even implies the alteration of some key concepts around abilities and superpowers – e.g. the black uniform of Spider-Man [1984-1985], and the electric version of Superman [1997-1998]. Some of the generational transitions (Kyler Rayner, Jean-Paul Valley, Bart Allen, Conner Kent, Jamie Reyes) also involved the establishment of new designs for the characters.

Certain generational transitions, such as that of Green Lantern, Flash and Batman were eventually reversed and re-framed. The short durability

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1 Initially, the characters created during the so-called Golden Age of DC Comics (1930s to mid-1950s) and those of the Silver Age (mid-1950s to mid-1980s) inhabited distinct narrative continuities, which were later characterized as parallel universes in the same multiverse that with increasing frequency came into contact with each other – since the story "Flash of Two Worlds!", published in *The Flash* # 123 in September 1961. From this editorial gesture the need arose to characterize all events of the Golden Age as independent events from those of the Silver Age, starring different characters even in the cases of superheroes who did not editorially went through a generational transition, such as Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman, who thus started having two distinct generations of the same characters– elements of narrative complexity that eventually made the post-*Crisis in the Infinite Earths* reboot necessary, in which dozens of parallel universes were condensed and time-lines were unified in a single universe.

2 Among the most iconic characters from Marvel Comics, the most significant case is perhaps Spider-Man (Peter Parker, Ben Reilly, Mac Gargan, Mattie Franklin, Miles Morales and Otto Octavius).

3 Superman underwent two more unusual types of substitution. He had four simultaneous successors after his "death" by the monster Doomsday – John Henry Irons/Steel, Conner Kent/Superboy, Eradicator and Hank Henshaw/Superman Cyborg – during the "Reign of the Supermen" arc, published between June and October 1993. He was also divided into two individuals in the "Superman Red / Superman Blue" arc, between February and June 1998, in a period in which he held powers related to energy manipulation.



of a good part of these procedures may point to a contradiction within the traditions of superadventures. To the same extent that the growing complexity of supernarratives creates a need for indexing an earlier repertoire that may become a burden, more drastic attempts to renew continuity and characters may also alienate readers, since the iconic/archetypal and relatively stable character of heroes that star in the pages of the DC and Marvel series since the 1930s may be one of the most attractive aspects for audiences who are still dedicated to read their stories (Coogan 2006). This can be felt even in the fact that a significant portion of super-adventure protagonists outside the Marvel/DC axis still somehow constitute a version of these iconic characters, whether in the form of inspiration, tribute, parody, satire or plagiarism (Wolk 2007): they overcome their condition of fiction characters to become archetypes or even new forms of myth (Reblin 2012), and as such they are hardly disposable.

Finally, the third path among the possibilities of revamping presents a more subtle, but potentially more lasting solution: the gradual change of personality traits, the profile of the actions and attitudes of the characters, their opinions and concerns in terms of culture and society, politics etc. This type of solution allows for maintaining the most immediately recognizable aspects of the superheroes, while the changes re-position them in relation to the other characters and allow to establish new relationships with the values cultivated – or repudiated – by the readers. We can see this in the different ways in which Batman's stance on the use of firearms has been narratively constructed in quite different ways over the decades since his creation, pending between unrestricted use and absolute repudiation (Rogers, 2020), or even the notion of “realism” that is present in his characterizations since Frank Miller's 1986 *The Dark Knight Returns* (Klock 2013)<sup>1</sup>. Something similar is pointed out by Lauren Karp (2009) when identifying the changes in Superman's characterizations as a mirror of changes through which the very idea of “American Dream”, of which the character would constitute an expression, in at least three distinct phases – the Great Depression and World War II, the emergence of the USA as a superpower and the institution of the Comic Code in the 1950s, and social changes after the Vietnam War).

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1 Brown (2018) states that modern depictions of Batman vary wildly – especially regarding his personality and personal ethics –, and this would be one of the most interesting features of the character for readers, since each author would be able to present their own view on Batman. In this sense, we can speak of “Frank Miller's Batman”, “Chuck Dixon's Batman”, “Grant Morrison's Batman” and even “Tom King's Batman” as separate individuals who express authorial views around a few basic concepts.





## MYTH IN SUPERHERO COMICS

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Humankind has always been in close contact with the notion of god-head, and in many monotheistic religions with the notion of a Messiah – the hope of a savior, of a protector, of someone who will bring justice to the weak. Each society obtained its heroes, its gods, its spiritual leaders. The role of mythology and religion, more than explaining the phenomena of life that cannot be understood by current knowledge, also brings hope for saviors, those who are in the image and likeness of the gods, or who are strong enough to challenge them, in both cases attributing meaning to human existence (Cazelli 2019, p. 144).

Most civilizations across human history had their own ideal image of a savior. Greek mythology featured heroes who deceived the Olympian gods not sympathetic towards humanity – e.g. the demigod heroes like Hercules and Perseus, or the Titan Prometheus, creator of humanity, who by defying Zeus gave fire to the men for developing their technologies: Prometheus was punished for this act, but still protected humanity from afar. Norse mythology included powerful and overwhelming gods like Thor, the god of thunder and Odin, the father of the gods. These two mythology systems also featured a grayer sense of morality, with extremely human gods and their selfish attitudes, like Zeus and Loki.

The pattern also expands in monotheistic Hebrew mythology, with Jehovah as a god of justice and an ideal of morality for his people, who following the pattern of other mythologies, demonstrates his superiority through power and intimidation and offers protection and care in exchange for human fidelity, but also punishment and death for those who defy and disobey him, while in the Christian New Testament Jesus' salvation mission is not achievable through physical means such as power and intimidation, but humanity, compassion, humility and meekness. His power is not to impose strength upon enemies, but to defeat "evil" with love.

That is why myths exist, and it is this ability to interpret the surrounding reality with imagination that makes humans symbolic and cultural beings. In order to seek knowledge, it is necessary to imagine, to express one's emotional needs as a collective and as an individual, it is necessary to imagine and interpret (Cazelli 2019).

Myths have always been a mixture of imagination, knowledge, and culture. Even myths that are no longer part of current religious beliefs, such as Greco-Roman myths, still have a direct influence on the social imaginary of nations. These impacts and influences cannot be erased and ignored. Thus, mythologies are still present and influence cultures in mod-



ern societies, still carrying several of their traditional elements, but also adapting to the historical-cultural scenario of their times, such as the fiction and entertainment industrial culture. The archetype nature of superheroes and superadventures, it seems, is a fertile ground for the expression of mythic content under a postmodern guise (Knowles, 2002; Lawrence & Jewett, 2002).

In this sense, superheroes become a symbol that motivates humanity to move forward. This symbolic characteristic is not random or artificial, but is due to the inspiration of these narratives in the mythical-religious tradition that preceded it and that remains, although not with the same strength, impregnated in the popular imagination. (Reblin 2012, p. 130)

According to Madrid (2016, p. 3), American comic books emerged in the 1930s, more precisely around 1934, when the popular comic strips started being distributed in collections. During that time, America was facing the Great Depression, looking for an escape from the stress caused by the difficult times of economic crisis, unemployment and uncertainties of the war. Seeking in fiction a means of transport to an easier and fantastical world. However, it was Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster who gave the American people something they could immerse themselves in search of a savior, bringing to life Superman and originating the superhero genre in 1939. As a powerful, skillful being, it is undeniable that the character brought brightness to America with the hope of a savior at least in dreams and in the pages of comics (Tye 2012).

The building of Superman is a mix of Greco-Roman myths, where physical strength, grandeur and superhuman powers demonstrate power over mere mortals, and as in Judo-Christian mythology in his impeccable morality, humility, kindness and charity, having values directly linked to Jesus Christ. In fact, it is possible to say that Superman is the Christ of comics (Morrison 2011). The first of its kind, which was there before everything started, the whole mythology of Superman is based on the molds of a messiah. "Making it clear how [Superman] is seen in his own universe: a human nature and a divine nature, as announced by the Christian creed about Jesus of Nazareth" (Gomes & Barbosa 2019, p. 142).

Gomes and Barbosa (2019, p.143) state that the similarities between Superman and Judo-Christian mythology and their messianic characteristics are visible and evident. Starting with the fact that its creators were Jewish, and the character was raised in a country founded on Protestant bases, e.g. the use of the word "El", which is the Hebrew word for "God", being used to name the character's kryptonian name, "Kal-El". His human name, "Clark", comes from Old English and means "cleric", and his surname, "Kent", is a Hebrew word that means "I have found a son". Gomes





and Barbosa also believe that the surname may come from the word "krista", which means "Christ". There are parallels to both the mythology of Jesus and Moses, since little Kal-El was sent to Earth on a ship to be saved from death, just as Moses was sent afloat the Nile in a basket. Like Moses, Kal-El was raised among those who adopted him and was belatedly called to his origins for the liberation and protection of his people. The difference is that he would be specifically protecting his adopted people, not his already doomed homeland. The parallels with Jesus are even more direct, with his adoptive parents, Martha Kent, nicknamed Mary, referencing the mother of Jesus, and her father Jonathan "Joseph" Kent. However, in later editions the references were lost, including the lack of Jonathan's middle name. This does not, however, erase a direct reference to a humble family that creates in its simplicity the son of the gods, who has powers and talents beyond the comprehension of humankind.

This mythological aspect is a constant in the superhero genre, even among those which origins focus on science fiction, e.g. Marvel Comics' Fantastic Four's, or are more mundane, such as Batman's. In the end, the whole genre is geared towards a mythology of salvation<sup>1</sup> (Knowles 2007, Lawrence & Jewett, 2002).

Precisely because it is constituted by this amalgamation of social elements, it is not surprising that religiosity is present in superadventures, especially in the messianic traits of these superheroes. Although incipient, research in this direction has already given rise to relevant works, for example, on the symbolic approximations between the figures of superheroes and the figure of Jesus Christ, [...] (Cruz & Cruz 2019, p. 47-48)

However, is it possible to consider the superadventure narrative genre as a form of mythology? Cazelli presents some arguments for an affirmative answer by stating that "Myths act as guides, leading us to live better, through the important lessons they teach us." (Cazelli 2019, p. 170). Myths are nothing more than narratives which purpose is to explain phenomena of life and nature, its origins and functions from a mystical perspective, and also to transmit moral values in the collective imagination through the sacred, understanding daily life and human experience in a mystified way.

Therefore, according to Cazelli (2019, p. 154), the narratives of superhero comics feature such aspects and can be framed in the concept of

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1 Although these aspects are more accentuated in the superadventures that involve the characters of DC Comics, whose acceptance by the population is wider and more intense. The crossover limited series *JLA/Avengers* (Busiek, Pérez & Smith, 2008) explores this contrast: the initial clash between the Justice League and the Avengers has its fuse as the latter team, transported into the DC universe, is shocked to realize there is a worship-like admiration of heroes in that world, and deduces that they must have established an authoritarian regime.



“contemporary myths”, since they present a modern guise of mythological and/or folkloric heroes, even in the context of capitalist mass-production of culture (Cruz & Cruz, 2019).

Another feature that supports it is the durability of myths in social imagination, even if their function changes. Greece-Roman myths, for example, had a religious aspect that no longer is active, however their direct influence on human values and institutions is still powerful and evident. Greek academies were built on the foundations of mythology; institutions like Law, Astronomy and Medicine, stories told nowadays, mass production narratives, even Christianity has strong links with these myths considered as “pagan” through the merger that originated Catholicism. Somehow, the myths are updated, renewed, and re-framed. “The same is true of comics, with superheroes. Another aspect of the myths is the possibility of being retold (and, in the case of superheroes, of being reinvented) without being worn out; the myths are in-consumable.” (Reblin 2012, p. 138). They never die, but they are modified to the current social and consumer culture, since the moral and ethical norms that superheroes need to reproduce also change. “The adventures of superheroes do not cease, but they continue to be told, adapted, invented and updated. They always respond to a context and change to match the context from which and for which they emerge.” (Reblin 2012, p. 138). This makes genre not only extremely influential in the social and collective imagination, but also reveals the cultural values of producers, consumers, and how market consumption influences these narratives through those aspects, making superadventures a completely new way of retelling myths and transmitting their values.

Thus, it is possible to conclude that the mythological nature of superadventures and the messianic aspect of superheroes reveal the desires, hopes and wishes of contemporary American society (Karp 2009; Tye 2012; Grabowski-Górniak, 2019), or even of humankind.

Ultimately, the stories of superheroes, the genre of superadventure itself, are contemporary mythologies interwoven into the complex web that constitutes contemporary cultural goods. If, on the one hand, they express the aspirations and pursuits of the contemporary human being – they rescue and represent values rooted in culture, remnants of a tradition, which are dear to the same contemporary human being, covering secularized symbols with a sacred aura –, on the other hand they are inserted in the cultural dynamics of post-industrial society: they participate in a Romanesque culture that tries to seduce the reader through the diffusion of a mass superman, obeying the interests of a hegemonic class that produces meaning and, concomitantly to this class, the logic of the market. (Reblin 2012, p. 144)



## METHODOLOGY

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In this paper we present a close reading of *Batman* #53. As pointed out by David James (2020), the close reading is a set of practices first proposed by I. A. Richards in *Practical Criticism* (2017) that puts the materialism of the text in first place, directly observing its forms of construction and enunciation. As pointed out by Dubois (2003) and James (2020), the close reading is usually related to formalistic perspectives of narrative analysis, although there are hybrid paths of reconciliation between such analytical procedures and interpretive approaches of a sociological nature. Thus, supported by Fish (1980) and Bakhtin (1986), we start from the assumption that no text is capable of enunciating by itself and therefore, given the impossibility of coming into contact with "the text itself", we will analyze the narrative gestures of the *Batman* #53 text in dialogue with cultural and ideological aspects that we notice are constant in superhero comics, by summarizing the events in the comic and commenting upon them. While our focus will be on Tom King's words and plot, a few visual aspects will also be briefly addressed.

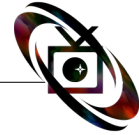
Our discussion will thus focus on the mythological and messianic aspects of superadventures, based on the assumption that superheroes are heirs of these narrative forms (Eco 1972; Knowles 2007; Lawrence & Jewett 2002; Coogan 2006r). Born during the period of the Great Depression, superhero comics have brought an imagery turned to salvation and hope (Madrid 2016). According to Reblin (2012), it is possible to fit superadventures as a form of mythical narrative, considering that an important aspect of myths is to reinvent themselves according to contemporary social conditions, including mass consumption products.

Thus, we will investigate how *Batman* #53 establishes a new relationship between Batman/Bruce Wayne and his understanding of his own social role, questioning the messianic dimension that the population of Gotham – as well as himself – projects on the hero.

## BATMAN #53: STEPPING OUT OF DIVINITY

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Like Superman, Batman is also a messianic figure – Thigpen states he even substitutes Superman as a monomythic figure since the 1980s. However, with some differences and featuring other aspects as a symbolic image. Superman represents the ideal messiah, who comes from heaven, from light, from salvation – a "sun god", according to Grant Morrison (2011). In "The Batman Files", by Matthew K. Manning, Batman expresses his vision on the Man of Steel, pointing out this fact:



And that's how we're different. Clark embraces the light. In fact, his very superman abilities are derived from our solar system's yellow sun. While I lurk in the shadows, knowing that the Batman is only effective to a public unsure of who or what I am, Clark parades around in the open, wanting his city to know its defender. He wants them to know that they're safe. That they have a guardian angel on their side (Manning 2011, p. 69).

Indeed, the partnership and deep friendship between Batman and Superman features a real and interesting symbolic contrast. Light and darkness, happiness and trauma, relief and fear (Klock 2013). Batman points to the divinity and glory that Superman represents:

In addition to all this, in the comics, the dependence of Superman on the Sun refers to the dependence of Christ on the Father, a metaphorical way to represent truth and justice, as if it were an uphill turn towards something profound, irreducible and timeless, being a representation of God. (Gomes & Barbosa 2019, p. 149)

In other words, Superman's powers come from the Sun, directly from God, being the divine and glorious messiah, while Batman is a humanized messiah, who does not show any differences from his protected ones because he is also human, vulnerable, without any divine abilities and fantastic powers, and Batman himself demonstrates feeling his humanity in relation to the other mystical and powerful heroes – "Meta-humans", in DC's own terminology – he feels his mortality, his weaknesses. And as a human, mortal, full of weaknesses and as frail as any other human, he feels responsible to keep the other gods and glorious messiahs with the conscience of humankind. He is the one who enters Olympus as an equal to ensure that the humanity within each one never get lost – which in some stories have dire consequences, i.e. the "Tower of Babel" *JLA* arc (Waid & Porter 2015). In this sense, Batman also reflects a messianic aspect of Jesus Christ, the god who made flesh, became human, became mortal, made himself weak (Thigpen 2017).

However, in *Batman*# 53 Tom King revealed the opposite: from Gotham's perspective, Batman is God. Not a messiah, a hero, or something tangible. "Thus, the myth constitutes a set of symbolic narratives that aim to convey a perspective of the sacred, which is necessarily beyond words, located in the 'mystery'" (Cazelli 2019, p. 151). Recalling Batman's humanity as nature, King shows through Bruce Wayne's lips his divine nature as a symbol.

The first symbolic message of the work is to show which god will be referred to in the story to use as a parameter as a comparison to the hero. It is not initially said in words, but the sign of the cross, the crucifix (Fig-



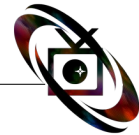
ure 1), which represents the death of Jesus Christ as a sacrifice to redeem the sins of humankind, is shown. Therefore, the benchmark used by Bruce Wayne, is the Judo-Christian god.

*Batman* #53 is the third installment in the six-part *Cold Days* story arc, written by Tom King and penciled by Lee Weeks, in which Bruce Wayne is called on to sit as a jury in the trial of the villain known as Mr. Freeze. The reason was the capture of the villain by Batman, who used extreme physical and psychological violence to make Mr. Freeze confess guilt over a series of murders of women, who were killed by freezing. Mr. Freeze claims innocence, and that he only confessed because he was coerced by Batman. For this reason, recognizing his mistake as a vigilante and hero, Bruce was the one who articulated his participation in the Jury, in order to do justice and to correct the mistake that Batman (by extension, himself) committed. This is one of the stories where the character needs to act not as a masked man, but as Bruce Wayne, his alter ego. As usual, the mission is not an easy one, as he alone needs to convince the rest of the jury that Batman made a mistake and Mr. Freeze, a villain, a criminal and a murderer, is for once innocent.

Three arguments led the jury to believe that Mr. Freeze was guilty: the victims of the killing were frozen, which was the typical method of the villain; the fact that Mr. Freeze had his costume on and a gun in his hand when he was captured, already anticipating Batman's coming; and finally, his own confession. Bruce then counters these arguments: first, he believes that someone was trying to incriminate the villain, and for this reason modified the bodies; the second reason is that the fact of Mr. Freeze being armed and wearing his costume, derives from the awareness that Batman would go after him even though he was innocent, making the villain prepare for defending himself; and third reason is the fact that Mr. Freeze was coerced to confess due to the fear of dying at the hands of an uncontrolled Batman who attacked him, and thus, in order to save his own life, and seeing that Batman would not return to reason, the villain confessed. Bruce reinforces this argument by using himself as an example, that he would also have done anything if it would have saved his parents' lives. However, all of these arguments are still insufficient to convince the jury, since that would be admitting that Batman had made a mistake in his judgment, which was inconceivable, since Batman supposedly never makes mistakes and is seen as superior to everyone else. It is from this part of the script that issue #53 begins.

The jury argues that there is no way Batman could be wrong in his judgment, since everyone at some point was saved by him, and everyone sees him as a god, and "God" never misses. With that statement, Bruce





Wayne begins his argument regarding the third, and final reason for the jury to condemn Mr. Freeze. The tycoon addresses Missy, one of the jurors, regarding the crucifix she wears on a necklace. The lady in question shows the crucifix, defensively stating that she believes in "God" and that she has served her church for 20 years, asking him if that was a problem. Bruce replies that this would never be a problem for him, but that since she wanted an argument that explained why Batman would make a mistake that would lead Mr. Freeze to be wrongly accused, her belief proved vital to his argument.



**Figure 1. Jurywoman Missy shows her crucifix when asked by Bruce Wayne about her religious position. (King & Weeks 2018, p.5)**

The character's attitude is defensive, which can be assumed by her question "Is that a problem?". In this interaction, there is a mirror of the reality shown by the relationship between Christian believers and society. Both myths and the media mirror the reality and historical context that are inserted, thus, a contemporary sign that is modeled to be understood by the reader who is experiencing that historical and social moment. "[...] if these symbolic productions reproduce, to some extent, social phenomena, it is urgent that we overcome the conception that they are simple



products of a culture of uncritical mass.” (Cruz & Cruz 2019, p. 44) Jurywoman Missy, in her direct inquiry, is making it clear that she will not admit Wayne to belittle her by her religion or misuse this religion, making the tycoon assure her that her belief in the Judo-Christian god is not a problem, to which she responds: "Good.". Here are some interpretive possibilities to justify Missy's defensive attitude. One is the context of an environment where her religion being questioned and brought up is strange, since they are in a trial, so it is clear that Missy fears that her judgment will be diminished by her belief. Missy fears religious intolerance. Another is the suspicion of Wayne being an atheist. It is difficult to consider the reason for the suspicion, but he is clearly taking a defensive stance, showing a certain dislike for the opposing religious views.

Still defensive, and a little irritated, the jurywoman asks the young tycoon whether he believes in "God". Wayne's answer is that he used to, but does not believe anymore (Figure 2).

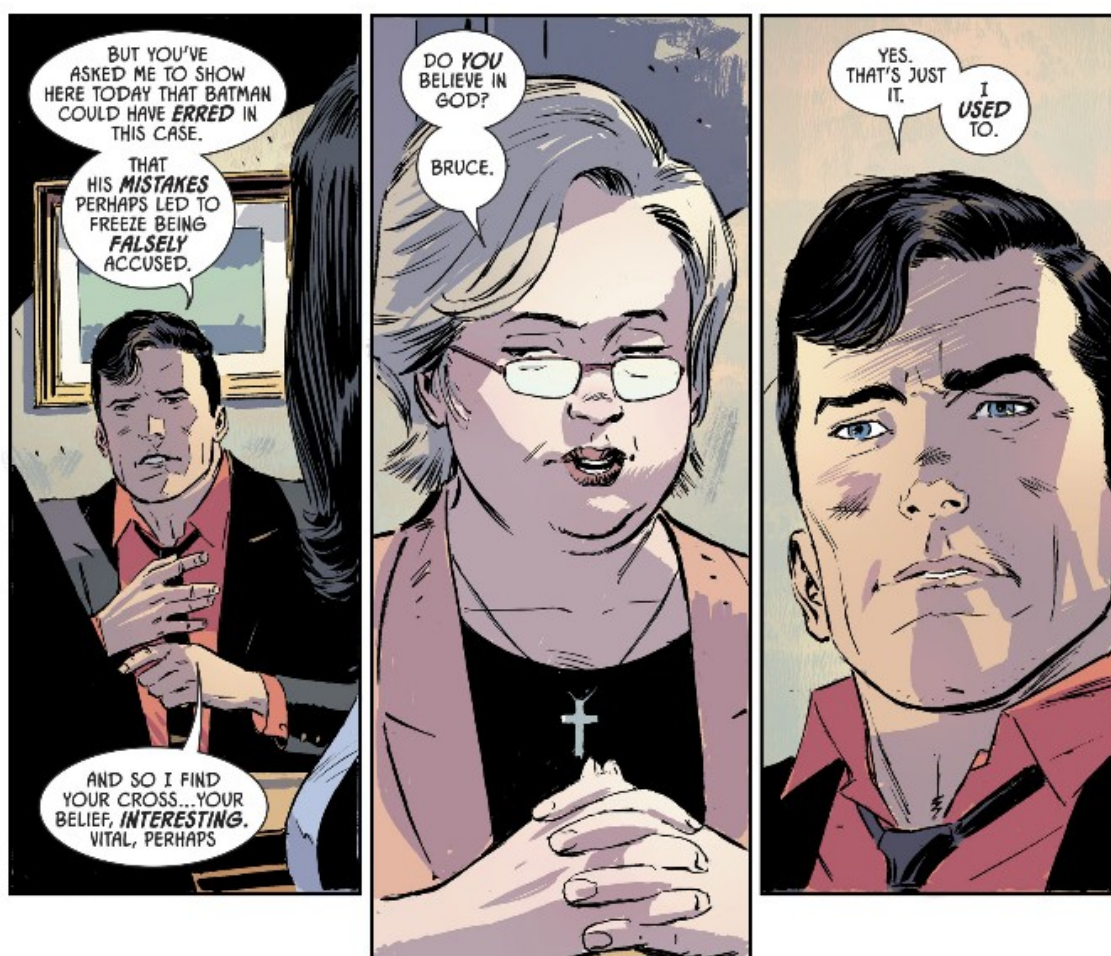
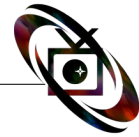


Figure 2. Bruce Wayne is asked whether he believes in God. He reveals that he used to, but not anymore. (King & Weeks 2018, p.5)



He says that his father, Thomas Wayne, used to believe in the Christian God. In the Father, in the Son and in the Holy Spirit: in his will, he trusted in the will of this god. Bruce's father wanted him to believe too, but he never forced him to – he wanted little Bruce to come to this god of his own free will. But they went to church together, Thomas told him all the biblical stories, explaining what they could control, and what they couldn't. However, after his parents' tragic death, Bruce was hurt. He put aside any belief in a deity, and he believed in absolutely nothing that his father thought could save him, because he couldn't see anything about how his father could have been saved that day. And when Bruce left Gotham for a while, he looked for something solid that could restore his faith, looked for answers, and even paid for them, but nothing was found. So he went home, and waited for that something to find him instead of looking for it himself. The communication of what this something would be becomes very clear, when the page shows Batman among the buildings of Gotham (Figure 3). This "something" was Batman.



Figure 3. Bruce states he was found by Batman. (King & Weeks 2018, p.8)



Bruce continues his argument, saying that everyone is gathered there because of that city, because of Gotham. And that if someone is a citizen of Gotham, then he or she knows, that that city is a place of monsters, of demons. And in the midst of all this chaos, there he is, the man with a bat stamped on his chest that fights all the thugs back. Everyone sees their brothers being rescued, their sisters returning home safely, all thanks to Batman.

When Missy asks Bruce back whether he believes in god, Wayne replies that he used to, but that his personal experiences led him to not believe in this god anymore. Right now we are faced with a social conflict that brings together opposing religious positions: Christianity and atheism<sup>1</sup>.

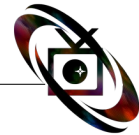
After Bruce's initial response, he goes on to explain and argue how Missy's religious positioning is important to his argument that Batman was wrong in his judgment of Mr. Freeze: it is a story of conversion, a moment of self-discovery.

First, Bruce points to the fact that his father was a Christian, as was Missy. He declares that he was created by his father to believe in this God that he trusted so much, but wanted him to accept him of his own free will, that he himself would find him. However, when his parents were murdered, Bruce could not see how his parents were under the protection of something greater, and his faith could not achieve anything.

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1 It should be mentioned that this part of the dialogue resulted in a somewhat negative response from fans of the hero (Zachary 2018), because even though it is not the main focus of the story, here Bruce Wayne/Batman, reveals himself to be an atheist or agnostic. This is an interesting position if we consider that a superhero has the function of representing the current morality of the historical and social context in which he is inserted. According to Cazelli (2019, p. 159) the protagonist hero of the superadventure has the symbolic function of representing a model of human being that should be desired and imitated, since this symbol represents the best in the human constitution from a moralist point of view. Atheism was considered mostly immoral until not long ago and even today and, according to Hammer et al. (2012, p. 44-45) while declaring oneself an open atheist is not immediately problematic, and atheists are not popularly regarded as a marginalized group, an expressive majority of Americans disapprove of atheism and hold several morally negative prejudices towards atheists. Taking this into account, it is not surprising that the indication of Batman being an atheist caused such a commotion among the public, that Tom King himself came to express himself on the subject on Twitter: "Lots of people saying Batman 53 (which I wrote) shows Batman is an atheist. That's not how I read that comic. But I don't think my reading of it is the most important one. Anyway, I hope you read the whole thing for yourself and decide for yourself." This event clearly shows how entertainment media as a cultural product is related in the capitalist and postmodern context. Comics are consumer products, so they are marketable, but writers make choices when telling their story, and this narrative receives a response from the public, especially now that social media has brought the consumer audience in direct contact with creators and editors. Therefore, the scene depicting jurywoman Missy asking in an accusatory tone whether Bruce Wayne believes in God, carries with it a great symbolic and social burden, and the response of the one who should represent the ideal to be achieved as a model of humanity, presented an answer that was not considered attractive and satisfactory for a significant portion of the public.





I... put aside believing in... a deity. Or believing in anything my father thought had saved him. I couldn't really see that anything had saved me. I left Gotham for a while. I searched for something solid to put my faith in. I asked a great deal of questions. I paid for some answers. But I didn't find anything out there. As far as I went. So I came home... and I waited for something to find me. (King & Weeks 2018, p. 7-8).

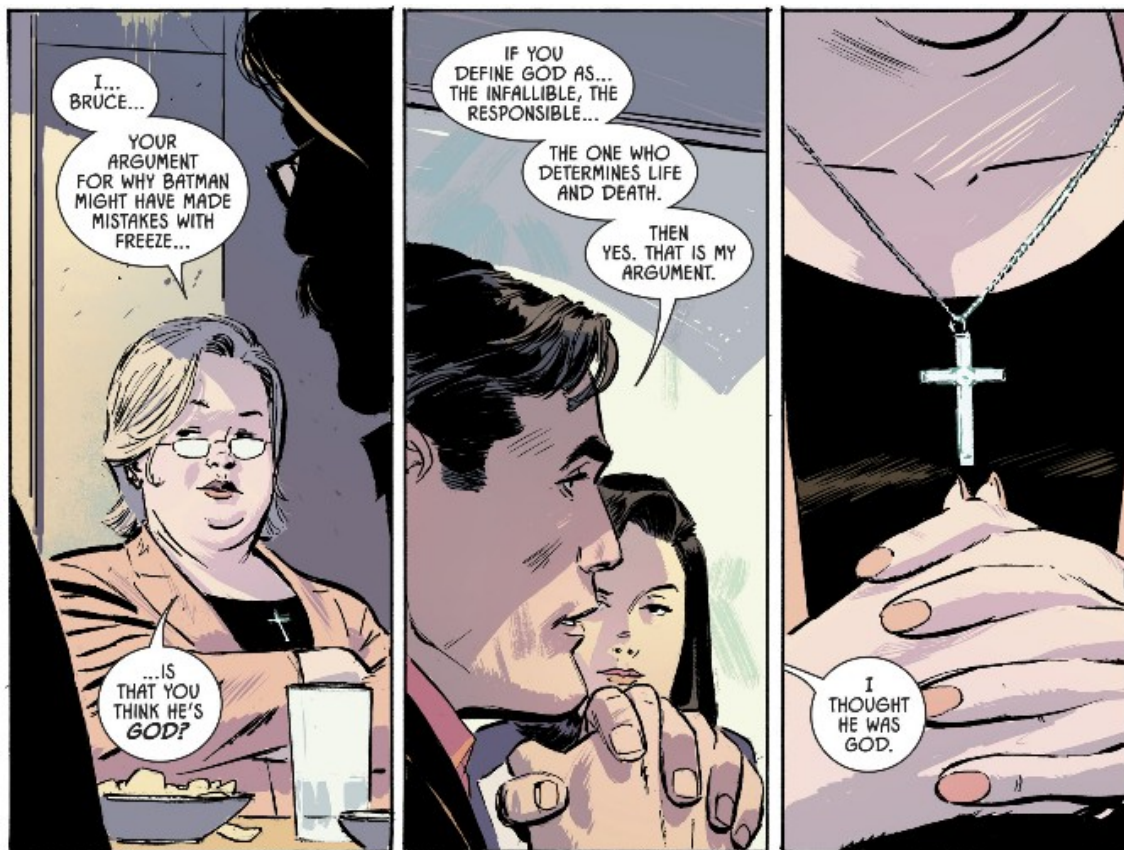


Figure 4. Bruce Wayne states that Batman was God to him in his symbolic nature. (King & Weeks 2018, p.11)

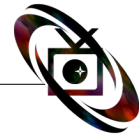
Here begins the parallel between the relationship of the symbolic image between the Judo-Christian God and Batman. This comparison is made within the symbolic field. As previously shown, Batman is an image, an idea, a symbol, an expectation. Much more than skills, this being possesses the power enveloped by the mystery, as stated in his *Secret Files*: "Batman is only effective to a public unsure of who or what I am" (Manning 2011, p.69). In continuing with his argument, Bruce talks about how Gotham is seized by chaos and evil, without hope and expectations of a peaceful future, so when Batman appears and punishes evil, saving the innocent, it is inevitable that citizens will look at him with great admiration, faith and hope. "We see our brothers rescued, our sisters returned. A man with a bat on his chest keep us safe". (King & Weeks, 2018, p. 10). Just as Christ is



represented by the sign of the cross, in order to refer to his sacred and divine nature, Batman is represented by the sign of the bat. Not much is known about Batman's nature, only the effect of his actions, and testimonies from citizens. Just as the nature of God cannot be revealed to men, so is Batman.

The divine mystery that can only be reached by witness. "Everything that the drama of the mysteries represents and produces in the viewer can also occur in the form of a spontaneous, ecstatic, or visionary experience without any ritual." (Jung 2018, p.121). The way he is called with a bright light source marking the bat sign in the sky, is closely related to a prayer of one who cries out for divine help.). The difference is that while God cannot reveal himself because his nature is unimaginable to humans, Batman is only "God" if he keeps his humanity hidden. Bruce makes it very clear that Batman was God to him, and still is to Gotham citizens and the jury there – in a symbolic manner, the imagery that is related between the sign of the Judo-Christian God and Batman are very close. In other words, Bruce used the religion of Missy, which is prevalent in American society where the entire jury is present, because it is a collective imaginary sign, re-signifying it for his purpose, and because Batman assumes the function that "God" normally assumes for Christians, in other words, they share the same archetypal patterns. Therefore, when Missy asks Bruce if the argumentative justification he was using is to say that Batman is God, he confirms it; however, not in his absolute nature, in abilities and origin, but in his symbolic representation. "If you define God as... The infallible, the responsible, the one who determines life and death. Then yeah, that's my argument. I thought he was God." (King & Weeks 2018, p. 11). He closes this argumentative part by saying that it is for this reason that Missy, and all the jury there are so convinced that Mr. Freeze is guilty. For this is the word of God, Batman said that he is guilty, and God never makes mistakes. Everyone there owes their lives to Batman, and no one has the right to question his decisions, because he would be perceived as perfect, and his will would be the law. God is above everything and everyone, and God wears a cloak.

The characterization of super adventure as contemporary mythology is not atypical. Superhero stories are often referred to as contemporary myths. Christopher Knowles, for example, links superheroes with archetypes drawn from mythical-religious traditions and legends: messiah, golem, amazon, brotherhood and magician. Duncan and Smith suggest that superheroes are considered modern myths because of their immersion in the popular imagination. (Reblin 2012, p. 129)



**Figura 5. Batman is God (King & Weeks 2018, p.14)**

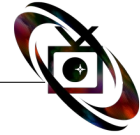
The next step in Bruce Wayne's argument, after establishing this symbolic and archetypal relationship between God and Batman, is to present what differentiates them, and what makes Batman not a God. What explain why Batman is not God. And for that, he uses the symbolic and archetypal similarity between the two using the myth of Job, when Job questions God because his life is falling apart. God, on his own initiative, destroyed the life of a righteous person, who without understanding it, questions God about the reasons for his misery. Job was a righteous, obedient, innocent man, and yet God punished and rebuked him when Job questioned the reason for his punishment.





**Figure 6. Bruce uses the myth of Job to link the questioning of God with the questioning of Batman (King & Weeks 2018, p.16)**

After that, Bruce feels terribly ill and the jurywoman asks if he is feeling well. But he doesn't answer, just raises his head and says that he was terribly injured recently, in reference to the previous arc in which he almost married Selina Kyle (Catwoman) and was abandoned at the altar, exactly because it was Batman's cloak that took off his happiness, the reason why he cannot be happy beside his beloved one. Bruce vents how much he put every bit of himself in Batman for years. Because he was good and could protect you from all evil, from all pain – his parents, his life, his city, and it was working, after so many years he could finally have something he never had. He was happy. But then everything fell apart, he fell apart, and he shouted at Batman like a prayer, begging to the mask, to the symbol on his chest, to the cloak, to help him. But he is still waiting.



And Bruce says: that he will always be waiting, because Batman is not God. Batman tries to be perfect, but he is not, he makes mistakes, and then he tries again. But the fact is that Batman is often wrong. He cannot relieve pain, offer Heaven, or comfort for those who have been killed. Bruce then states categorically to that jurywoman, that God blesses souls with grace, but Batman punches people with his fist. He then calls the attention of the jury that everyone is gathered to judge Mr. Freeze, that they all have the power to give or take away their freedom, and that this is a god-like power. Batman is as human as all of them there, but wearing a bat costume. That he is just a man, and that everyone there can be as wrong as he is, be as good as he is, and that they are not there to talk to God. And Bruce appeals that Mr. Freeze claimed that Batman was not acting like himself, and this indicates that he was distracted by something, and he was wrong. And in judging that case fairly, they would be the ones who would be saving Batman. With that, the issue ends with the end of the meeting, and the revelation that the jury has cleared Mr. Freeze of all charges.

To question God's decision, however unjust and perverse it may be, is a great sin, and if Batman is God, why would mere mortals who have been saved by him repeatedly question God's judgment on an ungodly man? After all, Mr. Freeze was a criminal. But, what if in this specific case he is innocent and Batman was wrong? Likewise, what if God makes a mistake? It is intrinsic in Christian culture (and I believe that in all cultures of Abrahamic religions) that questioning any aspect of the validity of the positions of God and religion is absurd. According to Dawkins (2006, p. 35) there is a cultural problem, especially in American society, in which to question any aspect of religion is a great disrespect, it is intolerance. Questioning the "why" about dogmas, the validity of religious intervention in the state, personal life or science, is unacceptable. That's because questioning God is unacceptable. It is this aspect that Tom King positioned very well in Bruce's argument about the natural tendency to not question Batman, after all, if he is God, one should not question him.

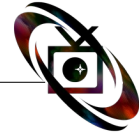
However, the comic's script does not dare to question this aspect within the sphere of religion, but to use the cultural characteristic coming from the Christian imagination to mark Batman's humanity and non-divinity outside the symbolic aspect. Bruce reminds the jury that behind the cowl and mask, the hero is just a man like everyone else in the court. Bruce declares that he placed his faith in Batman, that he prayed and cried out for help, but that he is still waiting, because Batman is not God, he is a man. Batman tries to be God, to be perfect, to be fair and good, but it is impossible. The symbol around Batman may represent what God rep-

resents to mankind, but Batman in flesh and blood cannot stand up to it, because Bruce is Batman, and Bruce is just a lost and traumatized man. Judging Mr. Freeze justly also brings Batman salvation, because in this way, he is allowed to make mistakes, and to be human. It is possible for a hero to err and be human, it is possible that he is not perfect.



Figure 7. Bruce ends his argument by concluding that Batman is not God.  
(King & Weeks 2018, p.20)





With this narrative gesture, Tom King addresses not only a shift in Bruce Wayne/Batman's characterization, in which the hero is relieved from the burden he imposed on himself, but also the very notion of the interventionist aspect of messianic superheroes, which through their mythical aspects are allowed to make justice with their own hands, to create their own justice, since all civil institutions are depicted as incapable of disrupting the menaces of evildoers (Cortiel & Oehme 2015; Costello & Worcester 2013; Lawrence & Jewett 2002). In *Batman* #53 the notion of Batman as a failed god should also mean that no individual is above civil society, and that its institutions and law should be preserved in order to avoid authoritarianism.

## CONCLUSION

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It is undeniable that American comics are an important communication and entertainment tool. Their narratives evolved to unite entertainment and impact society culturally, through the propagation of political, religious, moral bias, maintenance of institutions or their modeling with the current culture and morality related to their social and market context. Part of this is expressed in *Batman* # 53 in the words of Tom King, which delve into the mythological nature of superheroes, but with an interesting focus on Christianity.

Although Batman has always been the most human among the main DC Comics heroes, he still had an aura of infallibility (Brown 2018). It is important to remember that in classic stories like *Batman: Year One* (Miller & Mazzuchelli, 2005), Batman / Bruce Wayne himself publicly takes on the messianic mission of bringing salvation to Gotham City, and in the anticipated future of *Kingdom Come* (Waid & Ross, 1997) he transforms the city into a utopia/dystopia in which Batman becomes an almost omnipresent and omniscient being, remotely controlling robots with design inspired by his own which monitor and fight crime in all its forms. In the *Tower of Babel* arc (Waid & Porter, 2015), it is revealed that Batman extended this control craze even to his meta-human peers, and had created contingency plans to neutralize each of them in case any of them turned against humanity – on their own ill or under someone else's control – plans that end up being stolen by the villain Ra's Al Ghul and effectively used against those superheroes.



The theological locus is in Bruce Wayne/Batman's refusal of weapons, the fact that he does not yield to the corruption that corrodes and sickens Gotham City and, above all, to do what no one else can do: seek justice. Speaking of justice and peace today requires lucidity! Justice and peace are matters of God in our time. God's justice appears in human history as the defense of the poor. The meaning of this concept is entirely determined by God's saving character. The meaning of justice is defined by the fact that it is in all things God's justice, which is God's own, which he gives and must subsist in his presence. God's justice happens because He protects his weak, innocent people, victims of adversaries; it comes from love. Justice, therefore, in Batman's comics and for us in society must always be an integrating principle of all humanity. (Sbardelotti 2019, p. 105)

Therefore, Batman has the absolute confidence of the readers and the citizens of Gotham City – he has earned that trust after so many acts of heroism and offering salvation to the weak and innocent, but the hero himself, under his alias, asks for the people of Gotham to stop adoring him to that extent. Tom King's narrative is very much focused on how Batman's perception is related not only to a messianic image, but as God. The symbolic equivalent of the Judo-Christian God, Jehovah. Like him, Batman is also feared, respected, adored, trustworthy, and exalted as someone beyond the whole city. Batman is the one who saves, who punishes, who brings hope and never makes a mistake. Therefore, the contrast between Batman's divine figure carries, along with his extreme human nature, weak, flawed and fragile, show how the hero is liable to error, and readers can identify with that. Batman's admission of this aspect, in his Bruce Wayne persona, gives a new psychological dimension to the hero, who had the messianic determination to save Gotham, as well as a control craze – of society and the superhero community itself – as determinant aspects of his personality in the last decades (Cortiel & Oehme, 2015).

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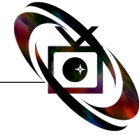
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