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**(Re)Mediating the Spirit: An Analysis of Evangelical Christian Young Adult Media**

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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## **Abstract**

(RE)MEDIATING THE SPIRIT: EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN YOUNG ADULT MEDIA

By Tamara Evaline Watkins

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2017

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“We are in the world, but not of the world,” a maxim frequently spoken in evangelical Christian culture, provides insight into how these individuals view their relationship with secular culture. They presume to share the same temporal plane with secular culture, but do not participate in it. In this dissertation, I explore whether the division between evangelical Christian culture and secular culture is as clear as this aphorism implies. To facilitate this investigation, I examine media Christian content creators created for an American evangelical Christian young adult audience in the early twenty-first century, specifically focusing on novel-length fiction, comics and graphic novels, and video games. Guided by a methodology informed by structuralist and poststructuralist theories, I uncover patterns in these media. I conclude that the boundaries between evangelical Christian culture and secular culture are less distinct than might first appear, which indicates significant contact and influence between these cultures.

## **Introduction**

### **(Re)Mediating the Spirit: Evangelical Christian Young Adult Media**

“We are in the world, but not of the world,” an aphorism spoken in evangelical Christian culture, helps us identify how these individuals view their relationship with secular culture: they share the same temporal plane with secular culture, but they do not participate in it. This statement succinctly defines the boundaries that some evangelical Christians attempt to place between evangelical Christian culture and secular culture. Importantly, this statement also clearly indicates the anxieties that some evangelical Christians feel regarding contact with secular culture. This maxim is catchy, but it fails to accurately describe the relationship between these cultures. One cannot exist within—or, as some evangelical Christians would argue, not in, but adjacent to—a culture and not be affected by it. This cultural contact, while decried by some evangelical Christians, is not, in my estimation, necessarily bad or polluting. In fact, this cultural contact profoundly influences the production of distinctly evangelical Christian media, and it accounts for a great deal of the form of and inspiration for these media.

In this dissertation, I examine this relationship between secular culture and evangelical Christian culture as it exists in works intended for adolescent audiences. Several global questions guide this research. These questions ask how secular conventions make their way into evangelical Christian texts, including whether this appropriation is conscious; how secular conventions shape the design and content of evangelical Christian media; what tensions arise when evangelical texts appropriate secular conventions and forms; and whether this appropriation of secular conventions contradicts the evangelistic and/or Christian messages embedded in these texts. In addition to these general questions, I ask specific questions, which appear later in this introduction, that allow for a more accurate and thorough analysis specific

media. There is no facile manner in which to assess evangelical Christian media and answer these questions. I assert that the appropriation of secular conventions occurs on both conscious and unconscious levels, and the ways in which this appropriation shapes texts varies widely in the corpus of evangelical texts.

Before I discuss these questions and evangelical Christian media in more detail, I must tackle the surprisingly difficult task of defining the term “evangelical Christian.”<sup>1</sup> It term is not easily reduced to a pithy definition, short enough for the reader to digest without too many parenthetical asides, qualifications, and footnotes expounding on the plethora of differences found in this community. Therein lies another reason why evangelical culture is fascinating and deserves further investigation. Heather Hendershot, who studies conservative media and politics, asserts in her book *Shaking the World for Jesus* that this designation “is a broad, somewhat amorphous category,” and that it is remarkably difficult to reduce the movement to a simple definition (2). Evangelicals in the United States are not a monolithic group, and the term is often used to reduce a rather complex group of Christians into an easily defined category, but this shorthand ignores the immense amount of diversity in this culture. These individuals come from a number of Christian traditions, and they exist in various social, political, and geographic locations in American culture. Evangelicals are not confined to a single generation or tax bracket, and they are an ethnically diverse population. Although they are often thought of as socially and politically conservative, liberal and moderate evangelicals exist in contemporary America. Arguably, the perception that all evangelicals are archconservatives is due to the fact that socially and politically conservative evangelicals are quite adept at amplifying their

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<sup>1</sup> For simplicity’s sake, I will use the abbreviated term “evangelical” throughout this dissertation.



messages and appear in numerous cultural locations, thus stifling other perspectives that arise in the community.

Additional nomenclature issues plague any investigation into evangelical Christianity. There is no standard term used for self-identification in this culture, and this lack of uniformity with respect to nomenclature further illustrates the diversity present in the evangelical community. The names by which adherents self-identify vary, which further complicates attempts to describe this group succinctly. Some members of this community self-identify simply as “evangelical,” but others prefer terms like “born-again” or “Bible-believing Christians.”<sup>2</sup> Other evangelicals eschew terms that describe their religious affiliation altogether. In an attempt to keep things simple, this study will use the term “evangelicals” to refer to all “evangelical Christians.”

Although a majority of both scholars and members of the general public seem to assume that one must be a Protestant to be an evangelical, but this conception of the community is flawed. Catholic evangelicals exist. Catholics and Protestants famously clash on some significant doctrinal issues, but these disputes do not render these Christians unable to coexist in the larger category of “evangelical.” Scholar Richard Rymarz notes that evangelicals regardless of denominational affiliation believe that scripture is “the revealed Word of God” (255) and view the individual believer’s relationship with Christ as the focus of Christian life (258). Additionally, all evangelicals view evangelizing—preaching with the intention to convert others

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<sup>2</sup> The term “Bible-believing Christians” is particularly interesting. It implies that the Christians who self-identify with this label are the only ones who believe in the Bible’s content, and that other Christians are, by implication, less devout, less Christian, and selectively choose content from the Bible in which to believe. “Bible-believing Christians” are often Biblical literalists, including individuals who believe in Young Earth Creationism and a literal interpretation of prophetic biblical books and the Book of Revelation. This term, with its connotative baggage, also portrays individuals outside of the “Bible-believing” community as less informed and less faithful, and therefore less legitimately Christian.

to Christianity—as “an area of perennial importance” (256). Lastly, evangelicals also believe in crucicentrism, which historian David W. Bebbington defines as “a stress on the sacrifices of Christ on the cross,” in this definition (2-3).

Practically, this study cannot fully discuss each type of evangelical interaction with secular culture that occurs in the United States. As a result, I narrowed this dissertation’s focus to media directed toward adolescent evangelicals. Reflecting larger evangelical culture, adolescent evangelicals are an economically and ethnically diverse group. However, the categories of media that I study in this project are large enough to contain texts that would appeal to a wide array of adolescents.

Although evangelicals have been creating media specifically intended for an adolescent audience since the nineteenth century, the proliferation of new technologies and media strategies has marked the last twenty years of American cultural history and has affected the number of texts produced for adolescent audiences. Surprisingly, the body of scholarship dedicated to discussing this cultural production is thin, and it overlooks some important aspects of texts in contemporary evangelical media. Evangelicals use new technologies and strategies to deliver texts to adolescent consumers in the early twenty-first century, a time during which the number of self-identifying evangelical adolescents is at an all-time low. Arguably, evangelicals who are concerned about this decline are struggling to adapt to the larger culture in which they live. They labor to devise ways to attract the population of adolescent evangelicals, and to build a sense of community through texts that help adolescents build and/or affirm their faith. Older evangelicals must communicate their religious messages to adolescents through less traditional methods. Lauren Sandler, author of *Righteous: Dispatches from the Evangelical Youth Movement*, states, “For a lot of young evangelicals, church is a rock festival, or a skate park or hanging out in

someone's basement" (Goodstein). This shift in how evangelical adolescents approach religion in the twenty-first century reflects, and is informed by, the media they consume. The boundary between religious and secular is blurred, but not to a uniform degree across all evangelical media. This blurring indicates that evangelical claims regarding living outside of the secular world are at the very least self-deceiving.

This dissertation explores the blurred boundaries between evangelical and secular media. Because "media" is a rather capacious term, I further narrowed this project's scope to focus on texts that could "pass" as secular, if not for the presence of Christian themes, rather than texts that are explicitly intended to serve as aids for devotional or worship activities. Admittedly, the distinction between texts intended to be used for worship or entertainment can, at times, be subjective, but some clear differences exist between these categories. For example, texts intended to aid worship often contain overtly doctrinal content. The texts I discuss in this dissertation represent three categories: novel-length fiction, comics, and video games. Each of these categories can be further divided according to the gender of the text's intended audience, the subgenre in which the text can be classified (for example, a video game that requires the player to dance), and so on. In some cases, such as book-length prose and comics, the categories of media analyzed for this dissertation contain a multitude of texts, far larger than could be appropriately examined. Later in this introduction, I discuss the manner in which texts were randomly selected for analysis.

This survey of texts forms the basis for this dissertation's primary purpose, the exploration how evangelicals adopt conventions, genres, and styles from secular culture, and in turn this insight can provide a deeper understanding of the tensions and trends within evangelical culture. I do not discuss the actual production of these texts and how audiences receive them.

Instead, I investigate the form and content of these texts, and approached from a structuralist perspective. As a result of this focus on text, not reader or author, I adopted a structuralist framework to my analysis. Instead focusing on the individual, structuralism allows me to examine the “super-individual structures of language, ritual, and kinship which make the individual what he or she is,” which in turn allows me to investigate how culture creates the individual (Cahoone 5). Understanding that culture, not the individual, is the creator of one’s worldview is supremely relevant to my analysis of evangelical media. The investigation of the evangelical maxim “we are in the world, not of the world” rests on an idea that evangelicals form a cohesive culture that, although not monolithic, exerts considerable influence on individuals’ identities. Structuralism also affords me the ability to directly address the presence of binary oppositions, such as Christian/Other and religious/secular, implied by the aforementioned aphorism. This, in turn, allows me to investigate the tensions these binaries engender between evangelicals and secular culture. This methodological approach also encourages me to analyze texts with respect to how patterns of signs provide insight into cultural conventions, codes, and norms.

However, my methodological approach is not solely based on structuralism. My analysis is also informed by Roland Barthes’ poststructuralist theory regarding authorial intent as described in his essay “The Death of the Author.” The text, not the author, is what transmits meaning to an audience. An author's intended meaning is unknowable and, frankly, unimportant once the text is consumed by an audience. As a result, the audience can interpret this text in myriad ways, all informed by an individual’s unique reading of that text, as well as his or her personal history as a reader, experience with culture, and so on. This analysis contributes to the body of scholarship on evangelical media, and help address gaps that exist in this body of

knowledge regarding the cultural exchange that occurs between evangelical culture and secular culture.

I am not the first scholar to notice the tension that these binaries cause in the evangelical community. In *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture*, Hendershot asserts that evangelicals “have used media to simultaneously struggle against, engage with, and acquiesce to the secular world” and that these cultural products “are symptomatic of both [evangelicals’] engagement with and distance from the secular world” (11, 25). The Christianization of “secular” media, including literary genres like science fiction, demonstrate the “highly permeable boundary between the sacred and the secular” (4). These observations inform this dissertation, as does the knowledge that scholarship devoted solely to evangelical media produced for and marketed to adolescents is scarce. One specific gap I address in this dissertation is the absence of research that directly addresses how evangelical media producers build on “secular” templates to design media that borrow from these generic categories while still containing evangelical messages. My methodological approach combining structuralism and poststructuralism best enables me to analyze these texts, both as unique products and parts of a larger corpus, reflecting tensions between binaries but divorcing the investigation from unnecessary questions regarding authorial intention.

While Hendershot’s scholarship informs this dissertation, the framework that underpins it differs considerably from her work. Notably, our scholarship differs with respect to the attention we give to the spectrum of political orientations found in the texts we analyze. Hendershot’s assessment that “most evangelical media are not propaganda designed to induce a political or spiritual conversion” is not entirely accurate (3). Additionally, issues plague Hendershot’s analysis of evangelical media and create gaps in the body of scholarship on this subject, which

this study will address. A great deal of Hendershot's analysis of evangelical culture and texts focuses on texts that contain conservative social and political messages. It seems unlikely that Hendershot consciously chose to focus on such texts to help build an argument about how conservative the messages present in evangelical media are—conservative evangelical texts are legion and difficult to ignore—but this focus nevertheless crucially portrays evangelical media in a manner that ignores the diversity present in this body of texts. It seems likely that scholars tend to center on this particular subset of evangelical media because the examples are so plentiful and tend to contain polemical and problematic themes, including those that are misogynist or promote the restriction of reproductive rights or LGBTQ rights. I did not consciously choose texts for this dissertation in a manner that represents a range of social and political messages. A desire to accurately and fairly discuss evangelical media, including texts that contain themes that might be classified as “conservative,” “feminist,” or “progressive,” informed my approach to this project. The randomized manner in which I selected texts for analysis helped me create an accurate sampling of texts, irrespective of the sociopolitical messages found in the texts.

In Chapter 1, I discuss evangelical young adult novels. This chapter discusses literary texts with a range of plots and settings, compiled into a master list of titles obtained from the websites of publishers, libraries, and retailers. From this list, I randomly selected fifteen texts for analysis. This approach ensured that texts representing the breadth of contemporary evangelical young adult novels are represented, and that the list of texts will not be culled in a manner that supports the dissertation's central argument.

Although I only discuss novels published between 2000 to 2015, a period during which these three media have coexisted, it is important to discuss the origins of Christian young adult literature to establish historical trends and context for this chapter's general topic. The body of

literature that discusses adolescent evangelical literature is surprisingly small, but a few texts can be identified as particularly relevant. Michelle Ann Abate discusses the connections between nineteenth-century Sunday school literature, both fiction and nonfiction, and the *Left Behind: The Kids* novels, a companion series to the adult-oriented *Left Behind* series.<sup>3</sup> Abate asserts that, while the *Left Behind: Kids* series incorporates elements from contemporary secular genres into its narrative, the series' "closest antecedents are the narratives published by the American Sunday School Union more than 150 years ago" (89). These texts served a literary and social purpose, mainly "to proselytize...and thereby convert young people to Christianity in general and evangelical Christianity in particular" (91). Abate also discusses other similarities between evangelical and secular literature, writing that nineteenth-century Sunday school literature used a rhetorical strategy that is "firmly within the tradition of American sentimentalism and the genre of sentimental writing" (96). This link suggests that individuals who create evangelical media have been borrowing from secular literary and/or cultural trends for centuries.

The *Left Behind: Kids* texts are not a part of this study, yet the ways in which they can elucidate historical and literary trends in evangelical fiction are important to consider because it helps us discuss the genre's history and connection with secular culture. Hendershot argues that apocalyptic fiction, like *Left Behind*, draws readers not only for theological reasons, but also because it is exciting (178). Apocalyptic themes have appealed to American readers for generations. The evangelical media produced during this era reflect the millennial anxieties that shaped American culture in the late 1990s (176). The anxieties this era inspired differed in secular and evangelical culture and secular culture; the former predominantly centered on concerns regarding computer malfunctions and systems failures, while the latter reflected more

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<sup>3</sup> The *Left Behind* novels were also adapted as video games, which I discuss in more detail in chapter 3.

spiritual concerns. The *Left Behind* series appeared in bookstores during the mid-1990s, and its plot reflects evangelicals' more spiritually-informed apocalyptic anxieties. Presenting a fictionalized account of the last years of Earth and the struggles of a band of devout evangelicals as they attempt to thwart the Antichrist's efforts to rule the world, *Left Behind* is marketed to adult readers, but it has branched out into adolescent-friendly spin-offs, including *Left Behind: The Kids* and a number of video games. Hendershot notes that *Left Behind: The Kids* "was marketed as a Christian version of *Goosebumps*," a popular secular young-adult horror fiction series. This marketing strategy, as well as the spin-offs' content, reflect an understanding of what adolescent consumers expect from the media they consume, and this in turn influenced the production and content of the media. It also indicates that the evangelical literary community is aware of, and attempts to emulate, trends in secular media.

Like their secular counterparts, evangelical young adult novels sometimes contain romantic plotlines; unlike these secular texts, evangelical books, nearly universally feature pro-abstinence, anti-sex messages and promote heteronormativity. Hendershot discusses nonfiction examples of these texts, such as Susie Shellenberger's *Guys and a Whole Lot More*, in chapter three of *Shaking the World for Jesus*. My analysis does not focus solely on pro-chastity messages in evangelical media, as other scholars, such as Hendershot and Jessica Valenti, have explored this topic. Nevertheless, my discussion of some texts included in chapter 1 will interrogate the ways in which pro-abstinence messages appear in evangelical Christian young adult novels. These texts require investigation because they provide considerable insight regarding how evangelical adolescents are being trained to view their place in and responsibilities to secular culture.



I also explore the ways in which evangelical authors borrow generic conventions, such as plot elements, rhetorical strategies, and publication design, from secular texts to construct their religiously informed texts. While reading evangelical texts, one often has the impression that the author did not appropriate secular conventions for the sole purpose of appealing to a broader audience. Undoubtedly, authors want their texts to be successful in the marketplace, but the content often missing from evangelical young adult literature—positive depictions of sexuality, in particular—distinguishes these texts from their secular equivalents and threatens to make evangelical literature seem priggish to readers. The appropriation of secular conventions in evangelical book-length prose creates tension, in part because it hints that secular texts have not only been consumed by evangelicals, but are deemed worthy of being imitated. Clearly, these authors have had contact with secular media, and have appreciated it aesthetically. It also implies that evangelicals do not always perceive secular media conventions as morally corrupting, despite the cautions some evangelicals give regarding the dangers of secular culture.

Abate's and Hendershot's analyses provide a foundation for my larger argument, mainly that evangelical media, regardless of genre or form, borrows considerably from secular culture and media. Each author describes the ways in which evangelical fiction has drawn on secular literary conventions and texts to create texts in which the religious and secular commingle. Nevertheless, there is a dearth of scholarship that specifically discusses evangelical literature written for an adolescent audience, which I aim to rectify.

Evangelicals have also employed other print media perhaps more traditionally thought of as the domain of adolescent readers: comics, a category that includes both comic books and graphic novels. In Chapter 2, I examine evangelical comics, a category of texts that contains approximately 80 titles, including both series and stand-alone texts. I based my analysis on a

sample of ten texts, and selection was informed by the observation that evangelical comics, like other evangelical media, reflect trends in secular culture. Evangelical comics are the logical result of evangelicals' understanding of secular comics' popularity and the long tradition of Christian graphic art. Graphic storytelling has existed throughout Christianity's history in the form of illuminated manuscripts and stained glass depictions of biblical stories. Thomas J. Carmody, a communication and comics scholar, notes that for the last forty years, evangelicals have further expanded this tradition by using comic books and graphic novels as a medium for disseminating theological messages (185). During the first decade of the twenty-first century, secular comic book-based films grossed over \$7.2 billion, and nearly 100 million comic books and graphic novels were sold. Christian publishing houses have benefited from comic books' popularity in wider culture, including developing tie-ins with existing franchises like *Left Behind* (180, 188). These texts are also popular in the evangelical community. One evangelical comic series, *Archangels: The Saga*, has 2.1 million fans; these fans are both male and female, and range in age from 10 to 35 (187).

The connection between secular and religious in comics is not new. Carmody notes that Superman provides Christians with an opportunity to compare the superhero's abilities with "theological attributes of Christ," such as compassion and self-sacrifice (189). Carmody overlooks the (admittedly perhaps heretical) ways in which Christ, his disciples, and angels might be portrayed as superheroes, rather than supernatural, divine beings. Carmody asserts, "Evangelicals have always searched for a popular medium that they can employ directly or indirectly to teach Christians how God works in their daily lives and to encourage those outside the faith to consider the claims of Christ" (191). This passage perfectly summarizes one of the foundational points of my dissertation: the balance between secular and evangelical

entertainment is often blurred, and evangelicals adopt popular forms of media in their attempt to both retain adherents and proselytize to the unconverted. Additionally, at times the line between heretical and theologically acceptable entertainment can be blurred. Whether a text's content falls between these two extremes is often decided on a case-by-case basis.

Evangelicals also create video games with Christian themes, which I explore in Chapter 3. Approximately 60 Christian video games were produced between the years 2000 and 2015, the era on which I focus. My research expands on the scholarship others have produced on this topic. In "Evangelicals and Video Games," media scholar Kevin P. Schut briefly traces the history of secular video games, as well as evangelical reactions to video games. He devotes part of the essay to discussing "evangelical gamer culture," discussing evangelical groups that participate on host servers of secular games like *Halo* (267). Additionally, Schut discusses evangelical video games. These games include *Myst*, massively multi-player online games like *YaHero*, *Scripture Solitaire*, *Axys Adventures*, *Break-out the Bible* and *Guitar Praise* (271). The products of the evangelical video game industry are "generally of low quality" and comprise approximately one percent of the overall video game market (269). Some games, such as *Break-out the Bible* and *Guitar Praise*, are clearly copied from the secular products *Arkanoid* and *Guitar Hero*, respectively (271). Hendershot also briefly discusses evangelical video games in *Shaking the World for Jesus* (28). A number of games based on the *Left Behind* novels have been released, to varying degrees of commercial and critical success. These games function as media tie-ins to the larger *Left Behind* franchise, reflecting a familiarity with the impact franchises have had in secular culture and an understanding of how to economically exploit an evangelical audience's interest in a franchise developed specifically for their community.

Little other scholarship on evangelical video games exists. As adolescents frequently consume video games, this particular form of media is of particular interest and importance to this dissertation. As in the case of evangelical comics, the paucity of scholarship on evangelical video games indicates that few individuals have considered the cultural importance of these texts, as well as the ways in which they appropriate and reflect the conventions found in comparable secular texts. A number of questions motivated my analysis of this category of texts. I wanted to understand where the line between heresy and entertainment exists, if it does at all; whether evangelical game design reflects secular conventions, such as aesthetics and plot development; and what narratological or thematic changes occur when biblical stories or praise music are adapted for gameplay.

By analyzing novel-length literature, comics, and video games, I explore the ways in which evangelical content creators use their texts to disseminate Christian ideas to an adolescent audience. Additionally, I address the fact that the evangelical maxim “we are in the world, but not of the world” is not an accurate representation of how evangelicals function in American culture. It identifies and analyzes the ways in which evangelical texts occupy a gray area between religious and secular entertainment. The focus of this dissertation has been refined to evangelical media intended for an adolescent audience because scholarship on this topic is sparse, and new inquiries into this topic promise to address gaps in the existing body of scholarship. Additionally, adolescents, as a group, are arguably the most amenable to occupying this precarious position between two cultures. Raised during a period of American history in which media access is valued and media literacy is taught, these individuals generally have positive responses to religious activities in nontraditional spaces. Media created for evangelical

adolescents demonstrates how fluidly conventions move from secular culture to evangelical culture, and how these conventions shape evangelical media.

Like much research, both scholarly and personal interests inform this dissertation. My experiences with evangelical Christianity are not unique, but they inform my perception of, and inspire my investigation into, Christian media. I spent my entire pre-college education in evangelical Lutheran schools, consuming the media that teachers and pastors presented to my classes and that my friends and I discovered on our own. Admittedly, I often eschewed most overtly Christian entertainment, considering its oft-earnest content too straitlaced and preferred secular texts. However, it is impossible not to recognize the cultural contact between secular culture and Christianity, even in secular media, and it was present in media that I consumed as an adolescent. One example is the Pixies song “Gouge Away,” an alternative rock adaptation of the biblical story of Samson. This example demonstrates that it is difficult to avoid any media that is not influenced in some way by the Judeo-Christian tradition, even if one gives her best effort to consume only secular media.

I concede that my experiences in parochial school have left me with certain impressions about the evangelical Christian media to which I was exposed. These experiences have also left me with questions regarding how these various forms of media are created, marketed, and consumed by adolescent evangelicals in the twenty-first century, nearly two decades after I was a member of that age group. The distance that I now have from my subject allows me to approach the media selected for analysis with a more critical perspective.

However, it is impossible to divorce myself entirely from my topic, and obscuring my connection with the evangelical Christian community would be a disservice to my analysis. I come to this topic with a perspective informed not just by my academic curiosity, but also a

decades-long interest in how religious information is created for and marketed to adolescents. This dissertation, although inspired by my personal experience with various forms of evangelical media and motivated by my desire to contextualize and explain these media, is not intended to be a memoir. It is an examination of evangelical media, not my personal reactions to these texts. Although I left the Church in which I was raised, I remain fascinated by, and respectful of, Christianity. I undertook the required research and writing in a spirit of respectful objectivity, and I intend to present my findings without prejudice or bias toward any philosophy or worldview.

## Chapter 1

### Reading Rites: Religion, Relationships, Sexuality, and Politics in Evangelical Christian

#### Young Adult Literature

Defining “young adult literature” is a surprisingly difficult task. Writer and expert on such books Michael Cart observes that the term itself is “inherently slippery and amorphous” (3). The genre can take on different forms. The subject matter and plots of young adult literature can vary considerably, but each novel is linked to other “young adult” literary texts simply by virtue of its classification in that category. This literary genre’s intended audience is equally ambiguous, and often disputed. The individuals who comprise this audience can range in age from ten to twenty-five (120).<sup>4</sup> This age range is broadly defined, and it reflects the long and formative period in individuals’ lives during which they are likely to establish their identities, explore their spirituality, examine their sexuality, and formulate worldviews that may or may not align with those of the adults around them.<sup>5</sup>

Roberta Seelinger Trites, author of several texts about adolescent literature, notes that young adult literature is sometimes called “jeans prose,” emphasizing the genre’s inclusion of various aspects of popular culture like fashion, music, and language (7). The inclusion of these references is not universal in young adult literature, and is highly dependent on the text’s subgenre. For example, it is much less likely for a fantasy novel set in a location other than contemporary America to contain American pop culture references. This integration of popular culture into literature is certainly not unique to young adult literature. However, the inclusion of

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<sup>4</sup> In fact, the audience extends beyond this generational boundary. Secular young adult novels, including the *Harry Potter*, *Hunger Games*, and *Twilight* series, have found enduring popularity with adult readers as well as their younger counterparts.

<sup>5</sup> The audience for young adult literature, as well as comics and video games, is not limited to adolescents. Adults also consume these media.

certain pop culture phenomena—popular singers, famous actors, acne treatment products—lends young adult literature a sense of verisimilitude by reflecting adolescents’ concerns, experiences, and interests. These references embed the text in a specific place and time, reflecting the authors’ interpretations of the setting’s cultural norms, concerns, and practices. These references also risk dating the texts, grounding them in a specific era that can make them less appealing and accessible to readers in future generations.

Given the tensions that seem to exist between evangelical culture and secular culture, the inclusion of these elements in evangelical young adult literature presents a more complicated situation. References to secular popular culture in evangelical young adult literature indicate that the presumed tensions and boundaries between evangelical culture and secular culture are at least partially manufactured by evangelicals, and not necessarily a result of a conflict between sacred and profane. Instead, they hint that a majority of mainstream evangelicals comfortably live in close proximity to, if not within, secular culture. If the premise that evangelical literature for a young adult audience is intended to function in a didactic capacity, then one must assume that these authors are positioning themselves as against and/or outside of another culture, one about which they must warn their readers. Evangelicals often proclaim that they are “in the world, not of the world,” thus establishing their difference from secular culture. These questions, regarding how and to what extent adults embed their worldviews in texts in an attempt to both construct and disseminate didactic texts to an impressionable adolescent audience. These questions guide this inquiry into young adult evangelical literature.

With a few exceptions, adults write and publish the texts intended for an adolescent audience. Thus, the ways in which these authors craft adolescent characters’ personalities, lifestyles, and worldviews reflect the authors’ perceptions of what it is to be a teenager. These



texts certainly have some root in one's recollection of youthful emotions and experiences, but are not necessarily mimetic. Adults comment on what they assume adolescents will think are culturally relevant phenomena and occurrences, but these assumptions might not reflect adolescents' actual concerns and interests. The creation of teenage worlds in young adult literature are filtered through adult perspectives for adolescent behavior, and a desire to guide adolescents to make decisions that align with their culture's norms. Authors who create evangelical young adult literature also feel pressure, either internally and from their publishing companies or externally, from their readers (or, more accurately perhaps, their readers' parents), to align their texts with their interpretations of Christian dogma and practice. However, individuals' interpretations can vary greatly. As a result, evangelical young adult literature is a surprisingly diverse category, and at times provides readers with conflicting messages regarding what constitutes appropriate Christian behavior and interpretations of the secular world.

Individuals learn about their culture, and their place in it, during adolescence. Trites notes that during adolescence individuals "occupy an uncomfortable liminal space in America" (x). During this time, adolescents are powerful, with respect to their "youthful looks and physical prowess that are glorified by Hollywood and Madison Avenue" and their economic power as consumers. Simultaneously, adolescents are disempowered by the objectification of their bodies and "decreased economic usefulness of the teenager in postindustrial America" (x-xi). Additionally, adolescents largely lack political and social power, a situation that often feeds their rebellious acts. Young adult literature helps guide readers through this process. Young adult novels are "often quite didactic," and "contain a direct message about what the narrator has learned" (ix). One of young adult literature's functions is to "[socialize] adolescents into their cultural positions" (Trites 54). This socialization occurs in multiple sites, but this chapter only

examines political, social, and religious dimensions. Novelist Sylvia Engdahl notes that, whether consciously or unconsciously, authors of young adult literature aim “to socialise children, that is, to make them behave in ways that are generally acceptable to adults—in ways that will fit the children to take their proper place in society, as adults perceive it” (43).

It is unsurprising that young adult literature often serves didactic purposes. According to Armin Grams, a child development expert, adolescence is an “impressionable age,” and adolescents are, generally speaking, a group that is “rather easily influenced” (22). Adults often focus their attention on providing adolescents with instruction to guide their moral development (22). Literary texts provide one vehicle for this moral and religious instruction. Although evangelical fiction is neither uniform in the way it disseminates theological content nor consistent in how it provides readers with depictions of Christianity or the divine, one can argue that all evangelical fiction forms a corpus that attends to readers’ various religious and spiritual needs. The fact that most evangelical authors are adults reflects the impulse to inculcate and guide adolescents’ moral and religious development, attempting to guide them toward a worldview that aligns with the authors’ interpretation of Christianity. That said, authors’ interpretations of Christianity vary greatly. Indeed, at times, these texts, although published by Christian publishing companies, do not even contain overt Christian themes.

Literary texts also reflect the version of society that authors want to see and want to be real, in addition to being an agent of socializing young readers into the mores authors think are important (Donelson 61). Adults’ worldviews dovetail with one of young adult literature’s functions: to socialize adolescents about the adult world in which they will soon find themselves. Sociologist Peter Scharf asserts that there are distinct types of moral concerns in literature: the literature of social expectations, the literature of social revolt, and the literature of affirmation

(103). Literature of social expectations “stimulates a sense of moral conventionality by praising ‘appropriate’ social attitudes,” and “provides a platform of social conventions upon which the...adolescent can differentiate [his or her] group’s social ideology from other philosophies”

(104). Young adult evangelical fiction functions in these capacities. It inculcates in readers a sense of morality and affirms readers’ religiously informed understandings of morality. Authors’ own social and political views, whatever they may be, may further inform these texts. The result is a corpus of evangelical fiction that does not have a clear sociopolitical perspective, but that all reflect basic Judeo-Christian morality.

Sexuality is a specific moral topic that young adult literature often addresses, regardless of specific authors’ religious affiliations. Trites posits that secular young adult literature often treats sexuality as a rite of passage (84). So, too, does evangelical young adult literature, although their texts treat sexuality in a manner that conforms to mainline Christian dogma. In the texts that form my sample, evangelical young adult literature largely omits sexual contact between unmarried protagonists and negatively depicts manifestations of sexuality outside of marital relationships. Evangelical authors are certainly not the only ones who treat sexuality in this way, but there is a good reason why evangelical authors treat sexuality in a socially conservative manner as this content helps inform adolescent readers about dominant views of sexuality within their religious community.

Authors who write for an adolescent audience might do so with certain assumptions about the propriety of teenage sexuality. Trites argues that literature written for an adolescent audience can act as a tool to regulate and repress teenagers’ sexuality and libido, and that authors who write for an adolescent audience “seem to assume that the reader has a sexual naïveté in need of correction” (85). Some young adult novels seem more preoccupied with influencing how

adolescent readers will behave when they are not reading than with describing human sexuality honestly. Such novels tend to be heavy-handed in their moralism and demonstrate relatively clearly the effect of adult authors asserting authority over adolescent readers. . . . As a topic, then, sexuality in young adult novels often includes a lesson for the reader to learn, and the topic also illustrates how language controls our perceptions of a bodily function” (85-86). This is especially true of evangelical young adult literature. Some authors assume a sexual naïveté of readers and young adult literature serves as a vehicle to influence adolescents’ sexual behavior. These texts demonstrate how adult authors attempt to shape adolescents’ interpretations of their own sexual impulses and perceptions of sexuality more broadly. Both female and male authors embed these messages in their texts. Whether their inclusion is intentional or not, these messages perpetuate the idea that “sex is to be avoided to protect vulnerable females ultimately end up affirming the patriarchal status quo, no matter how good their intentions” (95).

Evangelical culture is not uniform. It contains numerous subsets of believers, each with slightly different (yet what they deem to be literal) interpretations of biblical texts, gender-based expectations for behavior, sociopolitical issues, and reactions toward secular culture. Because their authors are so diverse, it is unreasonable to expect all evangelical literary texts to contain the same messages simply repeated in countless ways. Nevertheless, the texts I surveyed, despite their differences, contain striking similarities. Analyzing these texts provide the opportunity to discuss the messages adult authors embed in such texts, and to examine the numerous messages that are intended to shape the minds of a young generation of Christians. I focus my analysis on depictions of religion, gender, romantic relationships, sexuality, and sociopolitical issues because these subjects are of paramount importance to one’s identity. The adult authors can wield immeasurable influence to shape adolescents’ understanding of what it means to be a Christian

with respect to the aforementioned categories. These texts can teach readers about “appropriate” interpersonal behavior, romantic relationships, and political views. However, not all readers are easily influenced by media. Simply reading a text does not necessarily mean that an adolescent will adopt the views present in that text. A reaction against the content of a text, whether it is deemed too conservative, liberal, or unrealistic, can arguably still be interpreted the text functioning in a didactic capacity simply because it aids the reader’s social and moral development.

### **God Talk: Depictions of Religion and God in Young Adult Evangelical Literature**

This survey of texts provides insight into the multifarious nature of evangelical religious thought, as well as the lack of uniformity in this community with respect to the importance placed on portraying protagonists who explicitly adhere to doctrinally pure Christianity. I divide the faith of the protagonists in these texts into two basic categories, preexisting and converted. These broad categories can be further refined to reflect the diversity of religious depictions in this survey of texts. The former category contains texts that depict a range of spiritual states. Some characters have firm faith, while others struggle. Some characters seem to have religious faith, but do not discuss it much and it does not seem to factor into their plots significantly. Few protagonists’ denominations are mentioned in the texts; exceptions are Finley in *There You’ll Find Me*, who is Catholic, and Lizzie in *Running Around (And Such)*, who is Amish. Although most protagonists in the texts are Christian, some texts feature protagonists who do not belong to a Judeo-Christian faith, or whose faith is not unclear or not mentioned. Examples of this latter category include Hadlay in *The Mirror of N’de*, Thomas in *The Orphan King*, and Joraiem and Wylla in *Beyond the Summerland*.

Much like depictions of faith in protagonists, depictions of prayer and inclusions of scripture—whether quoted or alluded to—exist on a spectrum. Thirteen texts include characters who say or think prayers. These prayers vary with respect to content and intention, such as thanksgiving, requests for help, or praising God. In other texts, such as *Crazy Dangerous* and *The Mirror of N'de*, prayers are conspicuously absent. One wonders if the absence of overt religious content undermines the text's classification as evangelical literature, and Christian publishing houses would produce such texts. Surprisingly, there seems to be little connection between genre and the inclusion of prayer and scriptural references.

I categorize the inclusion of Judeo-Christian theological content and biblical references can be categorized into three sets: absent/nearly absent, moderately present, and frequently used. Three texts comprise the first category: *Crazy Dangerous*, *The Last Thing I Remember*, and *Beyond the Summerland*. Three texts comprise the second category: *The Mirror of N'de*, *Curse of the Spider King*, and *The Candlestone*. Unsurprisingly, the last category is the largest, containing the remaining texts in this survey. It is not surprising that the majority of texts in this survey would contain a significant number of prayers, theological content, and biblical references. I contend that these texts are intended for a religious audience, and (implicitly) intended to be religiously didactic and supportive of readers' spiritual development and adherence to Christianity.

A number of texts paraphrase and directly quote Bible verses. Christian teachings often focuses on the New Testament, but Old Testament texts are heavily represented in these novels. This focus on the Old Testament, rather than the New Testament that contains Jesus Christ's life, the events after his death, and the experiences of his earliest followers, at first seems odd because it essentially ignores the specifically Christian aspects of the Bible. Upon reflection, this focus on

the Old Testament is not so perplexing. This text's content is more historically and in many ways thematically removed from the New Testament. Thus, any adaptation of stories found in the Old Testament, such as *The Mirror of N'de*'s reinterpretation of Esther's story, would not potentially undermine or present problematic interpretations of Christian dogma. Although Christians read and discuss Esther's story, hers is not as fundamental to the Christian tradition as Jesus' or the apostles' stories. *The Mirror of N'de* is perhaps the most interesting text with respect to the inclusion or allusion to scripture. This text functions as a rewriting of the story of Esther set in a fictitious Akkadian city, complete with the protagonist's marriage to royalty; however, unlike in the story of Esther, Hadlay's betrothed does not help ameliorate the condition of her people. Sirach, a messianic figure, does.

Likewise, these texts' depictions of non-Christian religious traditions vary. Most texts in this survey do not mention non-Christian religions, but the texts that discuss other faiths do so in drastically dissimilar ways. Some texts treat non-Christian religions and adherents in a positive or neutral way. In *The Orphan King*, Christian monks are gluttonous, murderous, and thieving, practice witchcraft, and lack faith in Christianity, while Druids are morally upright. Although *The Mirror of N'de* is based on the Book of Esther, the text contains references to Akkadian mythological figures in ways that include them in mild oaths, such as "Great galloping Gilgamesh" and "Enlil's earwax" (Malone 124 and 260). Interestingly, this text hints at the truth in myths. One could logically conclude that this content hints that perhaps other religions are valid, a complicated and problematic inference for an evangelical text to contain. However, *The Last Thing I Remember* deviates significantly from this pattern. In this text, Islam, and the post-9/11 conservative anxiety and hysteria over "Islamofascism" and "Islamists" factor heavily into

*The Last Thing I Remember* (Klavan 238 and 326). The sociopolitical dimensions of this depiction of Islam will be explored further later in this chapter.

Texts in this survey do not share a universal name for God. This result is fascinating and unexpected. These texts are part of the larger corpus of Christian literature; one would assume that the name for the divine would align closely with that which is used in that religious tradition. A number of texts refer to the divine as “God.” These texts are set in contemporary America. Some texts are exceptions to this rule, and their deviation seems based on generic classification. *Shadow Chaser* is set in contemporary America, but the divine is referred to as “Elohim.” Likewise, *Chaos* uses “Ellyon,” another Hebrew name for God. In *Curse of the Spider King*, the divine being is referred to as “Ellos.” “Elohim” and “Ellyon” are names in the Tanakh (Old Testament) for God. “Ellos” is not a Hebrew word, but the root—“El”—means “God,” clearly indicating that the author wanted a certain “Hebrewness” to the name for God. Thus, a generic convention becomes clear: texts categorized as fantasy or science fiction, even if they are set in contemporary (or in the not-too-distant future) America, eschew the common name for the divine as used in American Christian denominations.

Other texts do not use biblically influenced names for the divine. *The Mirror of N’de*, a text categorized best as a blend of mythopoeia, fantasy, and historical fiction, uses a perplexing name for the divine. Initially referred to as “the Being” until its identity is known, this messianic figure self-identifies “Sirach” later in the text. This name choice presents some confusing and complicated historical implications. Sirach is the name of both the author of the Apocryphal book Ecclesiasticus, and an alternate name for the text (Nigosian 204). Sirach was not a messianic or holy figure in ancient Judaism. One wonders why Malone selected this name for the divine being in her text. A plausible explanation is that it is a Near Eastern name, and thus



thematically fits with Malone's appropriation of Akkadian and Egyptian names. Esther does not take place in ancient Mesopotamia, but this information is irrelevant because *The Mirror of N'de* is not intended to be a strict interpretation of the Old Testament story. The name "Sirach" is foreign while still being vaguely, potentially Hebraic to make the story seem plausibly Near Eastern; additionally, this nomenclatural choice is so strange that it helps further make the text seem to conform to fantasy generic conventions, which is appropriate for a text in which a prince conducts scientific experiments on animals and people.

The most interesting, and perplexing, instance of naming the divine occurs in *Beyond the Summerland*. In this text, characters refer to the divine as "Allfather." This is an interesting choice because "All Father" is alternate appellation for Odin (Munch 6). This name certainly aligns with the standard evangelical interpretation of God as an omnipotent paternal entity, but the likelihood of the use of "Allfather" being a coincidence seems unlikely. This latter interpretation dovetails with the use of "Summerland," a term used in Wicca. The presence of non-Christian religious concepts in this text reflects Christian writers' historical tendency to appropriate from surrounding cultures and religious traditions. It seems unlikely that L.B. Graham intended for his text to function as a larger allegory for the thousands of years' worth of borrowing that have occurred in Christianity, but nevertheless it serves as a subtle reminder of this tradition.

Similarly, there is no universal treatment of pronouns to refer to the divine presence mentioned in texts. In some texts, the pronoun used to refer to the divine is capitalized; in other texts, it is lower case. Regardless of capitalization, the pronoun is universally male. This inconsistency with respect to capitalization speaks to a lack of uniformity in the evangelical community with respect to how the divine is rendered in text. A pronoun that begins with a

capitalized letter draws the reader's attention to the word, making its importance obvious; however, one should not interpret pronouns beginning with lowercase letters as sign of disrespect to that being.<sup>6</sup>

This sample indicates that one can form conclusions regarding the lack of uniformity with which Christian authors depict their religion and conception of the divine in text. This lack of uniformity further emphasizes that evangelical Christianity is not a monolithic religious movement, and the adherents within it do not create art or even perceive the divine in a uniform manner. This interpretation of the divine complicates any description of how young adult evangelical literature acts as a tool to socialize its audience into the faith. This diversity underscores evangelicals' tendency to foster a plethora of competing interpretations of even its basic teachings. Although the individuals in this tradition tend to agree on major tenets such as the divinity of Christ and the infallibility of the Bible, the need to represent them in art is not necessarily a high priority. This approach indicates that some evangelicals might assume that their readers will not have their faith shaken by these depictions, and that these readers do not need to be given entertainment that adheres to strict interpretations of doctrine or that portrays every aspect of Christianity in a positive manner.

### **One Faith, Many Types of People: Depictions of Gender in Evangelical Young Adult Literature**

The texts included in this survey occupy a spectrum that extends from socially progressive and (moderately) feminist to sociopolitically conservative and oppressively heteronormative. It must be noted that these "socially progressive" texts, while they feature

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<sup>6</sup> *The Last Thing I Remember* is the only text that does not contain a pronoun that refers to the divine.

content that is more likely to challenge gender roles and expectations, are not necessarily radically “progressive” or contain content that would fundamentally challenge Christian dogma and cultural expectations regarding appropriate behavior, but they are informed by more female-friendly interpretations of these ideas. The depictions of gender occupy this same spectrum, with a majority of texts falling between these two extremes. Six texts, over a third of the literature sample, occupy the more socially progressive end of this spectrum. This is reflected in the protagonists in these texts are most often female.

Some texts in this category contain protagonists who do not abide by strict constructions of gendered behavior and have egalitarian romantic and platonic relationships. While some texts in this survey contain progressive, or progressive-leaning, depictions of gender, the texts only contain characters who conform to traditional Western interpretations of gender binarianism. The texts analyzed for this survey do not contain, or discuss, transgender or gender queer individuals. A lack of representation is not necessarily an indication of hostility to individuals whose gender identities do not align with traditional Western ideas. Nevertheless, this lack of gender identity diversity and representation is potentially indicative that such groups are in need of fair, honest representation—or even a presence in—evangelical young adult literature.

Melanie Dickerson’s *The Princess Spy* features Margaretha, a young woman “with a strong will, who never gives up, and is fiercely faithful to those she loves” (289). She discovers the nefarious plot her potential suitor, Lord Claybrook, has hatched against her father, a duke. Margaretha and Colin, another of her Claybrook’s victims, go on an adventure in an attempt to find and help her family. Margaretha, brave and confident yet feminine and respectful, is a conservative-friendly interpretation of feminism. When Margaretha finds herself alone and in a difficult situation, the narration declares that “she would rescue herself,” and she defends Colin

and herself against physical attacks (254). Lady Rose, Margaretha's mother, is also a strong-willed woman. In an attempt to keep Margaretha from marrying Claybrook, Lady Rose and Margaretha devise a scheme to switch identities so that the latter will not have to marry the odious suitor. This scheme is uncovered and ultimately unsuccessful, and it demonstrates that women in *The Princess Spy* are not damsels in distress; they are strong individuals who take control of situations, and they actively determine their own fates.

Throughout the book, Margaretha's relatives mock her loquaciousness. Margaretha's behavior provides an opportunity to address how women's voices are treated more broadly, in both secular American culture and evangelical culture. Throughout the plot, Margaretha is cognizant of, and at times apologetic for and embarrassed by, her voluble behavior. By the end of the book, Margaretha realizes that her personality is neither problematic nor something for which she should feel shame. She states to Colin, "And you have taught me that, though I do sometimes talk too much, I am still a woman of great worth" (290). This passage seems to be, at least tangentially, a way of addressing Paul's instruction for women to remain silent (1 Corinthians 14:34), as well as negative American cultural perceptions of "prattling" women who speak frequently and freely. Although it is problematic for a woman to tell a man that he has taught her about her worth, the positive and empowering aspects of the message are undeniable.

Like *The Princess Spy*, Bryan Davis' *The Candlestone* features strong female characters, and a tacit endorsement of female leadership. In *The Candlestone*, individuals can deviate from entrenched American cultural expectations regarding gender and still receive respect. The novel's two female protagonists, Bonnie and Ashley, are intelligent, strong-willed, and depicted in a way that deviates from traditional, arguably retrograde, gender-based expectations. Bonnie has remarkable physical strength, and she is assertive and brave. Ashley is assertive as well, and

her intelligence and loyalty to her friends are central to the novel's plot. She competently manages situations, including giving men orders that they obey without resistance. Other characters praise Ashley's intelligence; one states that she "is [emphasis in the original] the next generation of supercomputer" (381). Interestingly, Ashley's taste in literature—*Car and Driver* magazine—also diverges from the stereotype of female interests. Her friends do not judge her interests, but rather accept them as a part of who she is. The male protagonists and secondary characters in *The Candlestone* are also depicted as intelligent and strong-willed. For example, Billy, a protagonist, fights Palin, one of the antagonists, and defends Karen and her coterie of girls. This fight scene does not seem to be a matter of a man defending women out of chivalric or benevolent sexist intentions, or because he views them as weak and defenseless; instead, he is merely fighting his nemesis, while Karen and her group watch.

Wayne Thomas Batson and Christopher Hopper's *Curse of the Spider King* also contains an egalitarian depiction of gender. The text's plot focuses on seven teenagers who discover that they are not human; they are elves exiled from their home world Allyra, placed on Earth and raised as human. Each teenager has special powers that they can use to help save their home world. Both female and male teenage elves fight in combat. Along the way, female and male adult elves provide support and aid. Like their teenage counterparts, the adult elves have talents that do not seem dependent on their gender, and provide guidance and protection to their young charges.

One of the teenage elves, Kat, is insecure with respect to her looks and talents. Her behavior toward her peers does not seem to be a reductive, simplistic caricature of "mean girl" behavior. Her personality and reactions to other characters seem like a natural response of a wounded young woman whose experience has made her cautious around people. The fact that

Kat is written in a way that gives her character depth and verisimilitude, rather than simply portraying her as jealous and petty, indicates that Batson and Hopper were more concerned about depicting realistic adolescent behavior than portraying female characters as one-dimensional, petty, and replicating gender-based expectations for female behavior. This depiction indicates that evangelical authors can be both concerned with promoting Christian values and socially progressive views of gender and behavior, and that these ideas are not mutually exclusive.

L.K. Malone's *The Mirror of N'de* also features a strong female protagonist. *The Mirror of N'de* takes place in Turrus, a fictitious Akkadian city, and functions as a retelling of the book of Esther. The text's protagonist, Hadlay, is strong-willed, intelligent, and dedicated to her family and people, the Rama, who suffer from economic and political persecution. Taken from her home to work in the royal palace, where Hadlay defends herself against prejudice and accusations of theft and works to help improve the status and reputation of her people while she resides at the palace. She befriends Zêru, a prince to whom she later is betrothed. I will discuss this relationship in further detail later in this chapter.

While at the palace, Hadlay encounters Sirach, whose divinity is slowly revealed during the plot. He intercedes and helps Hadlay as she struggles to defeat Zêru, whose malevolence toward the Rama is revealed after his relationship with Hadlay develops. Identified by a male pronoun, Sirach functions as an allegorical Christ. He dies and comes back to life to protect those who believe in him. L.K. Malone does not appear to be stating that men must act as saviors, but rather she is repeating biblical teachings and interpretations of Christ in a fictional text. The messianic archetype is not unique to evangelical literature, but the trope's ubiquity does not undermine the effectiveness with which Malone deploys it in this text. Additionally, Hadlay also acts as a savior of her own people, demonstrating that assertiveness, bravery, and sacrifice are

not gender specific. Hadlay and Sirach both labor to help the Rama, but Sirach's abilities are supernatural while Hadlay's are mundane. Through Hadlay's efforts, as well as the help her friends and Sirach provide, the Oresed rulers are eliminated, human rule is restored, and the Rama people's condition in society is ameliorated.

L.B. Graham's *Beyond the Summerland* is another text in which female and male characters are equally powerful. In this text, Joraiem, a nobleman and prophet, goes on a journey with a group of individuals. This band of men and women intends to defeat Malek and his minions, bringing stability back to their land. Gender equality and respect inform the text, and are divinely sanctioned. For example, when members of the party discuss going into battle, Master Berin, a male character, says, "Surely...at least the women should be left here under my care" (295). Bryar, contests this, responding that she is "not a little girl to be told what [she] can and can't do, where [she] can and can't go" (295). Valzaan, a male character, settles the dispute, stating, "Allfather [a deity] did not discriminate between the men and the women when He spoke to men, and I will not tell them they have to stay behind" (295). The equality of genders, even in warfare, is clear.

Romantic relationships in *Beyond the Summerland* also deviate from heteronormative expectations. Over the course of the text's plot, Joraiem and Wylla become romantically involved, and their relationship is marked by equality and respect. They openly discuss their feelings and their families. Joraiem defies conventional expectations that a hero be stoic and unemotional; nevertheless, despite being perplexed by Wylla's emotional reactions, Joraiem does not respond in a condescending or belittling way to her. Likewise, Wylla defies expectations with respect to emotions. Her emotional reactions vary, depending on the circumstance, and her opinions deviate from her community without apology or explanation, which makes her

reactions verisimilitudinous. The lack of explanation also gives the reader insight into the universe in which this text is set; it is not abnormal for a female character to be emotional or stoic, but rather to have unique reactions for different stimuli. She does not sob like other women in their community when they think that the men in their party might not return. However, Willa weeps when Joraiem dies; this is an understandable, and realistic, reaction, as Willa is pregnant, newly widowed, and facing the possibility of parenting without her spouse.

Sigmund Brouwer's *The Orphan King* is yet another text that contains depictions of female and male characters who do not abide by traditional gender or religious expectations of gender roles. This text focuses on a character named Thomas's journey to fulfill his destiny to become a lord (198). The men who help Thomas on his quest are brave. Interestingly, not all men in the text are helpful, brave, or "good." The monks who raised Thomas after his mother died are corrupt, for example. They lack faith, and are gluttonous, thieving, and murderous; one is even a warlock. Few women have important roles in this text, but they are assertive when they appear in the plot. One character, Isabelle, helps lead Thomas to conversion, despite his apparent lack of interest in religious topics.

A majority of texts in this survey occupy a middle space between the socially progressive and socially conservative ends of this spectrum. These texts often feature female and male characters who are strong-willed, assertive, and capable, but also contain content that reinforces some traditional interpretations of gender roles and expectations. To varying degrees, these texts balance between presenting gender in a progressive manner and in a way in which affirms long-held assumptions and expectations regarding gender and behavior.

In *Shadow Chaser*, for example, Jerel Law presents gender in a largely egalitarian manner. In this text, both the adolescent characters attend an "angel school," a school for angelic,



or half-angelic and half-human, students. In this text's universe, both boys and girls are prophets (5). This prophetic ability seems to be a statement that the divine can communicate through individuals of any gender identity, which conflicts with conservative interpretations of women and religious leadership that are present in conservative branches of Christianity. Jonah, the book's protagonist, is intelligent and kind, but a bit immature and silly. His sister, Eliza, is intelligent and competent, often giving orders to those around her.

Although *Shadow Chaser* largely treats female and male characters as equals, it contains two instances of gender stereotypes, which complicate the reader's understanding of the text's orientation toward acceptable gendered behavior. . This occurs when Eliza, a female character, explains the reason why she took longer than fifteen minutes to get ready, stating, "We're girls. Cut us some slack!" (54). The inclusion of this stereotype seems at odds with how Eliza is portrayed elsewhere in the text. This aspect of her personality not only seems out of character, but it adds nothing to the plot, making it strange and a bit confusing to the reader. Interestingly, *Shadow Chaser* plays with gender stereotypes and undermines them in another location of the text. Jonah, the book's protagonist, is concerned about his skin; he experiences what he first thinks is acne, and attempts to find remedies for it. This anxiety is not uncommon among adolescents, but portrayals of anxiety over appearances tend to focus more on female characters. Jonah's concern about his physical appearance indicates that he does not conform to conservative cultural expectations with respect to male behavior. In this way, Jonah functions as a verisimilitudinous depiction of twenty-first century adolescent boys, and provides readers with the implied message that this behavior is not gender specific or inappropriate.

Thus, Law's depiction of gender is contradictory. He depicts Eliza in a manner that conforms to broad negative gender-based stereotypes in American culture, but he depicts Jonah

in a manner that defies traditional and conservative expectations of teenage masculinity. Perhaps it is easier to rely on stereotypes than to attempt to depict characters in a more developed manner, even if this reliance on tired clichés largely conflicts with the character’s personality elsewhere in the text. Perhaps stereotypes regarding female behavior are so ingrained in the American psyche that a male author has trouble creating texts that exist outside of this narrow understanding, but his firsthand experience with and understanding of male behavior allows him to depict male characters that defy traditional cultural expectations.

Like the other texts that occupy a more “moderate” approach to gender and relationships, Frank Peretti’s *Hangman’s Curse* contains female and male characters who are assertive, strong-willed, and unafraid to voice their opinions. Elisha and Elijah and twin teens who, along with their parents, form a team called Veritas that reports to the President of the United States and “investigate and solve strange mysteries, crimes, and occurrences...from a biblical, Judeo-Christian perspective” (1). Both twins are strong-willed, intelligent individuals who want to help their peers by bringing their strictly religiously informed perspectives to the secular classroom, and they challenge authority. Elisha debates the veracity of the theory of evolution with her teacher and peers; she finds that her science teacher agrees with her arguments. Likewise, Elijah also engages in a debate with his teacher and peers regarding topics ranging from the placement of the Ten Commandments at a courthouse and moral relativism in contemporary American culture. Teachers do not punish Elisha for her disruptive behavior, but Elijah receives detention. When discussing his classroom behavior, Elijah states, “Isn’t that just like something the Lord would do?” (102) The text implies that assertive behavior is acceptable in both sexes, especially when used to communicate with individuals whose opinions deviate from conservative Christian teachings.

Elisha's name is of particular note. The text instructs the reader to pronounce the name "E-lee-sha," not "E-lie-sha," like the biblical prophet (61). Nevertheless, the fact that these names share a spelling implies a connection between the characters. This name hints at some comfort with blurring gender. Giving a "male" name to a girl is not new either in literature or American culture. However, naming a female character after an Old Testament prophet, even if the name's pronunciation is changed, suggests a connection with the prophet and a level of comfort with the idea of a female character being identified with this religious figure, which in turn hints at the idea that women and men can both be vehicles for divine messages.

Although the text depicts behavior that conforms to gendered stereotypes, its treatment of women and men in the workplace is a bit more ambiguous. The pastors mentioned in this text are male, but the text does not contain commentary on the inappropriateness of women clergy. This commentary, even as subtext, is absent. The text contains depictions of women in positions of authority. For example, Molly's supervisor at her job is a woman.

Nancy O'Dell's *Magna*, like Frank Peretti's *Hangman's Curse*, contains socially conservative depictions of gender and the American teenager. In *Magna*, however, the focus is more on consumerism and physical appearance. A significant portion of this text is focused on how young women use clothing as markers of social status, thus perpetuating the stereotype that adolescent girls are obsessed with clothing. In *Magna*, Molly and her friends attempt to gain employment at their favorite store, Magna. Molly and her friends are obsessed with clothing, acting in accordance with stereotypes of teenage girls. This text does not contain any romantic relationships, but it contains a great deal of interpersonal conflict and turmoil. It contains instances of social manipulation and bullying that occurs between characters and a focus on dieting and weight loss, further playing on stereotypes of teenage female behavior.

Like *Magna*, Amish author Linda Byler's *Running Around (And Such)* focuses in part on clothing, accessories, and why some teenage girls can become fixated on such things. This text similarly contains a fascinating blend of socially progressive and socially conservative views. Although *Running Around (And Such)* contains very conservative perspectives on gender and romantic relationships, which I will discuss in further detail later, it is in truth a complex text that contains a multitude of sociopolitical perspectives. This text provides readers with an opportunity to appreciate the ways in which gendered expectations regarding appearance and behavior correspond to conservative evangelical interpretations of romantic relationships, but it also contains an at-times feminist representation of a teenage girl's perspective.

As a character, Lizzie conforms to gender-based stereotypes. In particular, she is obsessed with owning a pair of high-heeled shoes, and she views pretty clothing and "neat hair" as indications of one's romantic prospects. As a result, Lizzie focuses on what she perceives to be her inadequacies. Her family members reinforce this behavior by mocking Lizzie's appearance, weight, and eating habits. As a result, Lizzie is understandably very concerned about her looks. Her entire family berates Lizzie's eating habits and size, motivating her to attempt to lose weight. Lizzie's obsession with her perceived marriage prospects, a topic that she and her sisters frequently discuss, also fuels her preoccupation with her weight and appearance. Troublingly, once Lizzie obtains her long-desired high-heeled shoes and spends time with her friends, her appetite subsides. The implication is that thin, attractive women are popular and worthy of attention from men; once a woman becomes physically attractive, various aspects of her life improve.

*Running Around (And Such)* is largely a socially conservative text, but its protagonist surprisingly displays a nascent and, in her community, borderline subversive feminism. Lizzie

conforms to, and even embraces, some of her culture's gender-based expectations with respect to physical appearance and behavior, at times she questions the fairness of these expectations. For example, Lizzie states, "If we'd ask a young man for a date, they'd all have a fit. I bet the whole church, or anyone who found out anyway, would have a fit. It's so one-sided it isn't even right" (311). Lizzie is not the only character who seems to question these mores. Amos, Lizzie's love interest, allows her to drive the horse, despite the fact that men usually perform this activity. It seems that Lizzie might be on her way to an egalitarian relationship and marriage, despite her traditional Amish upbringing. Unfortunately, the novel ends before the reader can learn more about Lizzie's future.

Their protagonists are very different, yet *Running Around (And Such)* and *There You'll Find Me*, written by Jenny B. Jones, are similar texts. Both feature protagonists who struggle with body image issues. In the latter novel, the protagonist's struggles are linked to a trauma that has occurred in her family, but in *There You'll Find Me*, Finley attempts to find the Irish landmarks her now-deceased brother described in his diary. While she is on this quest, she also attends an Irish high school; lives with a host family; and works for, befriends, and eventually falls in love with, a famous Irish actor a couple of years older than she is. Finley is a well-developed character with realistic teenage traits. Strong willed, assertive, and snarky, Finley cares about others without her behavior being unrealistically saccharine. She defends her bullied friends, and she tries to help an ornery, dying old woman reconnect with her sister. Additionally, Finley's host mother, friend, and the nun who counsels and advises Finley are all strong willed, intelligent, and kind women. The men in this text are also intelligent and compassionate.

Finley is a complex character with a complicated emotional life and past. She struggles with anxiety and depression. Over the course of the book, Finley develops anorexia. Unlike

*Running Around (And Such)*'s Lizzie, Finley's eating disorder is not the result of social pressure or bullying. In this very realistic depiction of eating disorders, Finley's anorexic behavior develops over time, and is a way for her to attempt to control some aspect of her life in the aftermath of her brother's untimely death. *There You'll Find Me* addresses a very real phenomenon—the development of eating disorders, and their link to the need to have control of one's life, rather than simply about dieting and losing weight—in a nuanced, compassionate way. This approach allows Finley to develop anorexia, along with its attendant mental and emotional aspects, over the course of the plot in a realistic manner without rendering her into a rough, underdeveloped, potentially offensive caricature of a very serious illness.

Jones portrays other aspects of Finley's emotional life realistically, but seem intended to appeal to a conservative audience. Finley is a "hotel heiress" and reformed "Wild Child," and admits to having a relationship with an ex-boyfriend "who just wanted to have a good time and didn't care about the costs" and regrets this behavior (8). The reader learns little information about Finley's activities during this period of her life; whether she took drugs or had sexual experiences is not noted. At the beginning of *There You'll Find Me*, she states that she wears a purity ring as a reminder of her commitment to conservative moral and social views. Likewise, her romantic interest, Beckett, has a similar reputation that masks his religious views. Like Finley, this is not his "real" personality, and the stories about his behavior are fiction provided by his father-manager to the tabloids to keep the public interested in his career. Like Finley, he wants a quiet life. Beckett is vulnerable, isolated, and longing for emotional connections, defying certain stereotypes regarding male behavior.

A subplot involves Finley's attempt to help Mrs. Sweeney, a woman who is dying, reconnect with her sister, Fiona, after years of not speaking with each other. Finley, and the

reader, slowly learn the reason for this silence: Mrs. Sweeney married Fiona's boyfriend. This is not the betrayal it would seem; the man was abusive, and Mrs. Sweeney's act was merciful, intended to save her sister from harm. *There You'll Find Me* has feminist tones. It demonstrates women's emotional and intellectual determination and strength.

Although *There You'll Find Me* contains content that defies heteronormative expectations, its plot also contains aspects that reinforce and rely on these ideas. At one point, Finley uses the word "girl" to insult Beckett (203). Sean, the father of Finley's host family, seems to feel uncomfortable with his job as the cook at the family's bed and breakfast business. He wears aprons that state "I Gave Up Big Guns for Sticky Buns" (83) and "Real Men Make Flaky Pie Crusts" (191). These sartorial choices provide both comedic relief and insight into Sean's psychological state. He seems to be overcompensating for the shift in his identity; he is no longer "manly" because he performs "womanly" tasks, such as cooking and serving food. He appears troubled by the cultural meanings attached to these activities and masculinity. The aprons he dons transmit the message that, despite the fact that he currently works in the domestic sphere, he once occupied a more masculine cultural role and has not forgotten, or shed, that identity, despite his current vocation. Likewise, Finley's response to seeing Beckett wearing stage makeup indicates a level of discomfort with men transgressing gender expectations. Finley states her surprise that the stage makeup Beckett wears for his film role "should've feminized [him], but somehow didn't" (64). This statement indicates that, even when worn for professional purposes and not in an attempt to portray an individual of another gender identity, cosmetics are confusing and inappropriate on a masculine face. These treatments of gender-based expectations seem incongruous when considered in the context of the plot. For the most part, *There You'll Find Me* balances between socially progressive interpretations of women, highlighting the

bravery and sacrifice they display for others, but also adhering, at times, to traditional interpretations of gender roles.

Sarah Anne Sumpolec's *The Encore* also focuses on an adolescent girl's social relationships. While this text's protagonist, Beka, displays some personal strength and assertiveness, she largely defers to the men in her life, and she conforms to heteronormative conventions with respect to behavior and speech. Beka, a high school senior, is trying to determine her current romantic relationships and plans for her career. Beka is not a shy teenage girl; she is a strong, intelligent young woman, but one who is comfortable with deferring to men who assume control of situations. She obeys her boyfriend, Mark, and allows him to take charge of situations. However, she does not blindly follow Mark, and she openly expresses her opinions when she disagrees with him. Other men speak for Beka with her tacit approval. She struggles with the aftermath that resulted from performing a song that listeners perceived to be proselytizing at a school holiday concert, which draws local media interest and provides Beka with the opportunity to speak with the media. Notably, Mr. Thompson, her music teacher, speaks to the media more than she does, and Beka is untroubled by his behavior. The message seems clear: men should speak for women, even if the latter are intelligent and capable of self-expression.

*Chaos*, by Ted Dekker, also features a female character who is simultaneously strong-willed yet readily defers to a man. Set in 2033 Las Vegas, *Chaos* depicts twenty first-century America as a dystopia. Protagonists Silvie and Johnis arrive in Las Vegas in 2033 on a mission to find their comrades. Silvie and Johnis are both physically and intellectually powerful and are both "chosen ones," destined to help locate books that will help them save their home world. Despite being charged with this important task, Silvie focuses on her love for Johnis and desire



to marry him, aligning with conservative notions that women should be focused on pursuing interpersonal relationships, even at inopportune times. Johnis makes decisions that affect Silvie without consulting her. Notably, he announces, without first proposing, that they will get married. In this instant, he strips Silvie of her agency. Although Silvie gets what she wants—marriage to Johnis—he neglects to ask her whether this is what she wants. Thus, it is clear that Johnis and Silvie are not equals, at least in Johnis’s estimation.

Both *Becoming Beka* and *Chaos* instruct readers to view female assertiveness as acceptable only when it does not conflict with or challenge male desires or undermine male social dominance. In these texts, female characters are willingly subordinate to their male romantic interests or authority figures; in other scenes, these female characters are assertive when they interact with men who do not have more social power than they do. On its surface, this behavior is framed in feminist terms and as promoting female agency. However, its philosophical underpinnings are inherently patriarchal, and it, in fact, undermines the female agency it ostensibly promotes with implied limitations. Therefore, I call this “self-determination with a caveat.” It is a safer version of female empowerment for more conservative members of the evangelical community that allows female characters to be strong-willed when such behavior does not threaten to disrupt the social conventions of their communities or interpersonal relationships. This is nonthreatening feminism, which is perhaps the most palatable kind for a conservative-leaning audience.

Thus far, even the “moderate” texts, if they venture into anti-feminist territory, are not strictly hostile to women. These texts contain depictions of women who are assertive, even if they defer to men. Two texts out of the fifteen in this survey, *Crazy Dangerous* and *The Last Thing That I Remember*, are overtly hostile to women. Notably, Andrew Klavan wrote both of

these texts, the only examples in this survey categorized as “conservative” with respect to depictions of gender and relationships. Filled with representations of female and male characters that conform to socially conservative interpretations of gender, these texts seem intended to appeal only to conservative white male evangelical readers.

In *Crazy Dangerous*, the protagonist, Sam, is a masculine teenage athlete who attempts to save Jennifer, a mentally ill classmate. While he attempts to protect her, he evades the police and uncovers a nefarious plot by “Satanists.” Jennifer refers to him by his full name, stating that “Sam Hopkins” is “the magic word” (158). This makes his importance in her life apparent: Sam is Jennifer’s savior. Portrayed as always doing the right thing, even when he breaks into a hospital and abducts Jennifer, Sam is always heroic.

The dynamic between Jennifer and Sam is undoubtedly informed by the former’s mental illness and the latter’s chivalric sense of duty. However, the text contains other troubling, sexist depictions of men and women in *Crazy Dangerous*. Sam’s mother is hysterical, while his minister father is logical, even when he contradicts himself. *Crazy Dangerous* features Mary, a female assistant minister. Sam does not discuss Mary’s intelligence and skills as a minister, focusing instead on her personality and physical appearance. Sam describes Mary’s “kind and cheerful” personality, “comical” voice, “squat” body, and “short salt-and-pepper hair” (166). The reader wonders why it is necessary to know the body type of the female minister, but not her skills as an orator. Her physical appearance seems unnecessarily unattractive, and one wonders if this is Klavan’s commentary on the connection between beauty and authority. This description seems to be a stealthy way by which Klavan can appeal to male readers who embedded in socially conservative environments that view female authority and autonomy with suspicion and resentment. By depicting a woman with social influence as unattractive, Klavan strips her of an

important social commodity (beauty) and implies that women cannot be both powerful and alluring; the former neutralizes the latter, and the latter characteristic is the one that matters most. Troublingly, at the end of the book, the text implies that Sam becomes romantically involved with a Zoe, “pretty little black-haired girl” whom he liked throughout the plot (319). A relationship with Zoe seems to be Sam’s reward for his heroic deeds.

Klavan’s other text, *The Last Thing That I Remember*, also features characters who conform to conservative cultural expectations regarding gender and behavior. *The Last Thing That I Remember*’s protagonist, Charlie, is an exemplar of sociopolitically conservative suburban America. He has a black belt in karate and an “an all-American face” (219). He is a caricature of extreme masculinity; he favorably compares martial arts and Christianity, and he quotes Winston Churchill. Charlie lists the lessons he has learned from important people in his life; notably, only men teach these lessons. Self-assured and always in control, Charlie remains calm during stressful situations. His karate skills and ability to think quickly in stressful situations allow Charlie to evade law enforcement (much like Sam in *Crazy Dangerous*), as well as escape from an apparent life sentence after a false conviction. Additionally, there are textual hints that Charlie is prejudiced against overweight individuals; he is judgmental of individuals who are not physically fit, describing a man pejoratively as “chunky” (29). This perception of other people is not only uncharitable, but also not in keeping with mainstream Christian teachings regarding the kindness adherents should show to others. It undermines Charlie’s status as a Christian hero, and it complicates *The Last Thing I That Remember*’s status as a text with Christian themes. Indeed, it seems that this text, aside from casual references to Christianity, does not display many Christian ideas.

Klavan's male protagonists are shockingly similar in both texts. Both Sam and Charlie wrangle with law enforcement, but they are morally correct—even if they are not on the same side as the authorities. Klavan's protagonists fight the law and win, although their “wins” vary. Sam returns to his normal life, but Charlie continues to evade law enforcement. Regardless, the fact that they can defy law enforcement and not suffer considerable punishment, or even death, speaks volumes about the white male privilege that permeates these texts. Both protagonists also form a relationship with the object of their romantic desire, thus making these female characters seem like a reward for the protagonists' macho behavior. Notably, the female characters, with the exception of the protagonists' romantic interests, are depicted as emotional, unpredictable, weak, or mentally ill. These aspects of the texts make their audience clear: they are texts by and for white American males. These texts do not feature characters or plots to which adolescent girls or people of color can relate. This aspect of the texts makes them shockingly tone deaf in twenty first-century America, which is becoming more aware of the need for cultural diversity and representation.

The worlds in which Klavan's characters exist are oases for conservative, white, Christian teen boys. In the worlds in which Klavan's protagonists exist, the men, or teenage boys, always know what to do. They are self-assured to the point of smugness and choose which authority figures to respect. Like many protagonists in young adult literature, Klavan's protagonists know more than most of the adults in their lives, thus making adults' authority seem unnecessary and unearned. Unlike characters in other texts in this survey, whether secular or evangelical, Klavan's protagonists only respect male authority figures, such as their fathers or, in Charlie's case, his martial arts master. Women in Klavan's texts are not role models; instead, they are the subject of mockery, their attractiveness evaluated, their mental state questioned.

Most problematically, women in *Crazy Dangerous* and *The Last Thing I Remember* are classified into distinct categories: they are either “crazy” or they have social authority and power, and therefore not objects of desire; they are adults who are hysterical or “comical”; and lastly, but importantly, they are rewards for being “good guys.” Klavan’s protagonists exist in unrealistic universes.

### **Virtue, Not Vice: Romantic Relationships and Sexuality in Evangelical Young Adult Literature**

The texts used for this study do not form a body of literature with a single, unified depiction of strict prescriptions with respect to gender; likewise, these texts, when analyzed together, form a spectrum of representations of sexuality and/or romantic relationships that promote sexual abstinence. I discuss romantic relationships and sexuality together because they are intimately related as concepts. Additionally, the texts in this survey that feature romantic relationships display a uniform orientation toward promoting abstinence. This thematic consistency demonstrates that the authors share a preoccupation with chastity that cannot be separated from conservative political rhetoric or conservative evangelical teachings regarding sexuality. These texts address different ways in which adolescents’ social and religious lives intersect. Some topics and themes are more common than others, such as gender-based expectations for behavior, in general and in romantic relationships; depictions of purity culture, and attendant anti-sex and anti-pornography messages; and teenage sexuality, rape, and victim blaming. Every text contains depictions of gender, but not every text contains sexuality or romantic relationships. That said, no text in this study contains a depiction of consensual teenage sexual activity outside of the confines of marriage. This apparent prohibition against the

depiction of consensual premarital sex promotes traditional notions of appropriate sexual behavior in their adolescent readers. Some texts do not contain romantic relationships. Not every text in this survey contains this subject matter. If it is absent in a particular text, I simply omit discussion, or even mention, of that text in this section.

As the demonstrated earlier in this chapter, depictions of gender in literary texts provide insight into how authors attempt to transmit various social and cultural ideas to readers. Likewise, authors' portrayals of romantic relationships and sexuality also provide insight into the diversity of interpretations of behavior that even the most conservative evangelicals would likely find acceptable. However, a major difference exists between the depictions of gender and romantic relationships/sexuality in this survey of texts, and one cannot overlook its significance. As discussed in the earlier section, the texts in this survey contain a number of different interpretations of acceptable behavior, and this forms a spectrum from very conservative to somewhat socially moderate. Each text in this survey promotes chastity; this pro-abstinence message manifests in numerous forms, but text communicates that romantic and sexual relationships should be conducted within very strict boundaries.

Jenny B. Jones' *There You'll Find Me* contains a mature, feminist portrayal of romantic relationships. The romantic relationships in the text (between Finley's host parents, between Finley and Beckett) are grounded in mutual respect and admiration. Finley and Beckett's romance develops slowly, and it remains chaste. He, along with her host family, urge Finley to seek treatment for her eating disorder. His intervention does not seem heroic, as if he must save Finley for chivalric reasons. Instead, Beckett's behavior seems inspired by a deep concern and caring about another individual's well-being.

Melanie Dickerson's *The Princess Spy*, like *There You'll Find Me*, also contains a healthy romantic relationship that is marked by mutual respect. A romance develops between Margaretha and Colin; conforming to traditional romance story plot structure, miscommunication and obfuscation of the characters' feelings delay their romantic relationship and provide tension in the plot. Margaretha contemplates what it would be like to kiss Colin, but her ruminations are chaste, hinting at, and reinforcing, evangelical expectations regarding sexual purity. When the couple finally kisses, the passage depicting it emphasizes consent and love: "She kissed him back, because she was in love with [him]" (276). The subtle inclusion of the concept and presence of consent provides a clear lesson to readers that any physical contact should be both wanted and appropriate for both parties. This reflects trends in secular American culture regarding the importance of consent. Dickerson connects consent and love, not necessarily discussed together in secular American culture, thus making the discussion of consent more palatable for a potentially conservative Christian audience. Margaretha and Colin's physical relationship does not progress to anything more sexual than kissing, which also indicates Dickerson's understanding that more conservative readers—or their parents—might not think that such content is appropriate for adolescent readers, even if consent and love are present in the relationship.

Dickerson depicts Margaretha and Colin's as mutually respectful in other ways. After proposing marriage, Colin tells Margaretha, "I think I fell in love with you when you refused to let me leave you with Anne. Or maybe it was when you came and freed me from the dungeon, then fearlessly lead the way through that secret tunnel" (285). The reader understands that Margaretha and Colin's relationship is egalitarian, and one between individuals who respect each other's strengths and personalities. *The Princess Spy*'s theme is clear: strong women not only

save the day, but they marry the handsome noblemen for their choice. Respectable men will not feel threatened by strong women. In fact, these men want to marry women who are assertive and intelligent.

Unlike *The Princess Spy*, *The Candlestone* does not contain romantic relationships, but it contains physical contact between characters of different sexes. In one scene, two characters have physical contact, but this act is not romantic. Bonnie's and Billy's hands brush briefly, and Bonnie "squeezed his hand" (348). Bonnie's action seems to be a gesture of moral support, without clear romantic intentions yet containing the possibility of such. This ambiguity is realistic and mirrors that often found in interpersonal relationships. Davis seems to be concerned with accurate, nuanced depictions of relationships, rather than oversimplified, unrealistic, grandiose displays of affection.

*The Mirror of N'de* also contains a royal romance, but it is markedly different than *The Princess Bride* and its characters, Hadlay and Zêru, interact like the characters in *The Candlestone*. Hadlay is taken from her home to work in the royal palace, where she defends herself against accusations of theft and she actively works to help improve the status and reputation of her people. She befriends Zêru, a prince to whom she later is betrothed, but this relationship is not romantic. It is functional, and exists to enable Hadlay and Zêru to get what they desire. Hadlay wants to help her people; the reader later learns that Zêru wants to drink the blood of the Rama, much to Hadlay's dismay. They never consummate their relationship, and the characters never touch each other romantically.

Like Hadlay and Zêru, *Beyond the Summerland*'s Joraiem and Wylla have a chaste relationship. Unlike Hadlay and Zêru, Joraiem and Wylla kiss and hug, and eventually consummate their relationship, waiting until after they are married. The reader only learns about



their sexual relationship because Wylla is pregnant later in the plot). The omission of sexually explicit content is normal for young adult literature. Its absence in *Beyond the Summerland* also reflects general evangelical cultural standards regarding sexual activity in sanctioned (marital) relationships. Whether intentionally or not, this depiction subtly affirms and reinforces socially conservative expectations regarding “appropriate” behavior, providing adolescent readers with a fictional example of an acceptable romantic relationship.

The texts in this “socially progressive” category differ greatly with respect to their content, but they share the fact that they contain characters who do not abide strictly by heteronormative or religious standards of behavior. Despite these deviations from expectations, these texts adhere to more conservative evangelical standards regarding romantic love and premarital chastity. This is interesting and speaks to a great deal about tension, even if at an unconscious level, within these authors between their more progressive leanings with respect to interpreting gender and their desire to promote cultural standards regarding sexuality to their adolescent readers. It indicates authors’ strong impulse to perpetuate archaic and repressive ideas regarding sexual behavior, even when these values are at odds with the twenty-first century ideas concerning behavior in public and private spheres that the authors concurrently hold.

In *Hangman’s Curse*, neither Elijah nor Elisha engage in romantic relationships in the text, but the devastating emotional aftermath of romantic relationships is part of the novel’s plot. A group of bullied students identify with Abel Frye, a student who hanged himself decades before the novel begins. Abel had “a crush on a girl, but she fell for [his] worst enemy;” this rejection drove Abel mad, and he killed the object of his affection and then himself (66-67). The story imparts to the reader an understanding of the dangers of unrequited love. Interestingly, one does not learn Abel’s victim’s name. This anonymity functions on two levels to further expand

the meaning, importance, and interpretation of Abel's story. The first is that it removes the female character's identity, making her an afterthought in the story, not a murdered person with a story and life independent of Abel. She is not important enough to be named, simply functioning as a plot device to illustrate Abel's madness. The second interpretation allows one to consider how narratives develop and circulate among groups of people. The sensational nature of Abel's story and the anonymity of his female victim transform the story into something akin to an urban legend within the text's universe. The vague details and the scandalous and violent aspects of the story make it seem intended to frighten listeners than recount an important aspect of the narrative that the reader should assume actually occurred in the narrative's universe. It is the only romantic relationship discussed in the text, and can function as a cautionary tale for hormonal teenagers reading the novel about the dangers of romantic relationships, reinforcing socially conservative expectations with respect to the appropriate expression of romantic and sexual desire.

Linda Byler's *Running Around (And Such)* also contains very conservative perspectives on gender and romantic relationships. Throughout the book, Lizzie and her sisters, Amish young women, frequently discuss marriage. This dialog seems strange to readers who are not in a community that promotes young marriage. Lizzie and her sisters are taught that women must submit to their husbands and fathers, and the external aspects of being a woman, mainly one's appearance, can affect one's romantic life. For Lizzie and her sisters, a connection exists between physical beauty and romantic prospects; they give no thought to the intellectual or emotional aspects of womanhood, adulthood, and romantic relationships. Here, the boundary between gender and romantic relationships blurs, allowing readers to understand how these phenomena are related.

*Running Around (And Such)* is a novel about relationships: between family members, between friends, and between potential romantic partners. Lizzie has a number of crushes, and some romantic missteps with men who act in inappropriate ways that make Lizzie uncomfortable. Eventually, she meets Amos, and they begin a relationship. The novel focuses on Amish customs for dating and marriage. This culture also includes expectations regarding how women will act. In one scene, Lizzie's father chastises her for being "a flirt" (203). Arguably, this is a version of shaming women who are perceived as promiscuous. It places the onus on Lizzie, who at fifteen arguably does not understand romantic social cues, to behave in ways that she might not yet understand. *Running Around (And Such)* presents an overtly socially conservative depiction to romantic relationships. Despite the fact that Lizzie is a teenager, marriage preoccupies her thoughts, and she receives a great deal of advice and feedback regarding this aspect of her life. Her family tells her repeatedly that her looks determine her marriage prospects. Lizzie is aware of other factors that affect her marriageability in Amish culture. She encounters Dora, and speculates why she never married, thinking her status is "perhaps because of her health problems" (186). Lizzie's mother tells her to "learn to pray sincerely for God's will in her life with a humble spirit...so that God could lead her to the right man" (238). She sees a connection between God's will and marriage. This perception strips her of her agency to pursue relationships. She waits for God to be her matchmaker while she tries to conform to Amish expectations with respect to her behavior and physical appearance. She is dependent on male figures in her life, whether God, her father, or potential suitors, to guide, sanction, and reward her behavior.

Like *Running Around (And Such)*, Sarah Anne Sumpolec's *The Encore* also focuses on an adolescent girl's pursuit of a romantic relationship. *The Encore* contains a complex message

regarding relationships and sexuality, which allows the reader to interrogate many related topics in a relatively short plot. An integral part of *The Encore*'s plot is Beka's need to choose between Mark, her boyfriend for whom she has tepid feelings, and Josh, her friend's brother, a college student, with whom she feels an emotional and spiritual connection. Sumpolec creates a confusing paradigm for adolescent male behavior. Young men can be "fun" and a "distraction" (87). If they are inappropriately persistent, even without being physically intimidating, they are not good candidates for successful, serious, wholesome romantic relationships. These young men will quickly date other girls after a breakup, demonstrating their lack of serious romantic intentions. Young men who are suitable romantic partners will be more socially conservative and old fashioned. Josh, the young man with whom Beka begins a romantic relationship toward the end of the book, states that he does not "like the girl to take the initiative" (233), and even asks Beka to a dance at her school, which he does not attend. Josh is "protective" of Beka (243), and he decides to transfer to a college in California, where Beka will record her album, despite the fact that they are not a couple at that time. Beka is eighteen years old, but the men in her life presume to have the right to dictate her behavior. Troublingly, Beka accepts these rules without complaint or protest.

*The Encore* is hostile toward sexuality expressed outside of marriage, and the text contains the rhetoric of purity culture and abstinence-only education. Individuals who engage in "inappropriate" sexual encounters suffer the consequences. Beka willingly kisses her boyfriend, yet she feels morally conflicted about this activity, indicating that even kissing outside of a stable, godly relationship is morally ambiguous. Sexuality is treated as dangerous. For example, Lori, Beka's friend, found her father looking at pornography on his computer. Lori told her mother about this discovery. Her father did not admit "what he did was wrong," which resulted

in his daughter's unhappiness and the dissolution of his marriage. This depiction dovetails with the position conservative organizations such as Concerned Women for America (CWA) often promote. CWA claims that pornography is responsible for a litany of negative aspects of American culture, including divorce (Valenti 91). The most troubling portrayal of sexual activity that occurs later in the novel. Beka's younger sister, Lucy, is raped by a classmate at a party. Lucy blames herself for the assault, and Beka does not contradict her. This portrayal also mirrors sociopolitically conservative views of rape and female sexuality. Some abstinence-only education programs promote the idea that girls and women are responsible for preventing their own rapes, and that ultimately women are responsible for men's sexual behavior (Valenti 108).

By constructing a plot in which Beka does not state that Lucy is a victim and therefore not culpable for her assault, Sumpolec implies that women are (sometimes) responsible for being sexually assaulted. This dangerous message mirrors rhetoric that is present in American classrooms, but especially so in a text whose intended audience is comprised of young individuals who likely have little experience with romantic relationships and are still adjusting to their burgeoning sexuality. Sumpolec's message is clear: sexual activity, even kissing or (implied) masturbation, outside of marriage can cause problems and confusion, and can destroy one's family. Individuals engaged in sexual activity, whether or not consensual, are to be blamed for their actions. *The Encore* is anti-sex and shockingly regressive in an era marked by increased activism against sexual assault and awareness of victims' rights.

*Chaos*, by Ted Dekker, also contains problematic depictions of sexuality. Set in 2033 Las Vegas, *Chaos* depicts twenty first-century America as a dystopia. Protagonists Silvie and Johnis arrive in Las Vegas in 2033 on a mission to find their comrades. Silvie and Johnis are both physically and intellectually powerful and are both "chosen ones," destined to help locate

important books and save their world. Despite being charged with this crucial task, Silvie focuses on her love for Johnis and desire to marry him. Johnis does not seem to contemplate marriage as much as Silvie. Without proposing to her, Johnis announces that they will have a wedding. In this instant, he strips Silvie of her agency. Although Silvie indicates throughout the text that she wants to marry Johnis, he does not actually ask her to become engaged to him. Thus, it is clear that Johnis's and Silvie's stated desires are not afforded equal consideration, at least in Johnis's estimation.

Silvie and Johnis infrequently kiss and maintain a chaste romantic relationship reflect their culture's marriage customs. This focus on chastity and matrimony implies that physical contact between individuals should occur only between two individuals who are close to entering the institution. Dekker communicates this message in another way, by illustrating the violent response to a man's attempt to initiate inappropriate sexual contact. A drunk man, whom Silvie finds disgusting, flirts with her and implores her for a "kiss before the old death match" (66). Silvie "let[s] the bald prisoner kiss her hungrily and waited patiently" (71). Once he stops kissing her, Silvie knees him in the groin and the face. After she strikes her attacker, Silvie pronounces, "Never mistake a woman as an opportunity for bliss" (72).

Silvie is correct; coercive behavior is morally reprehensible. However, Silvie transformation from passive to active in this scene results in a confusing message. Silvie does not fight off a sexually aggressive attacker until the assault is over. One could interpret the scene as suggesting acquiescence to sexual assault without protest. The scene is multilayered. The reader does not learn the drunkard's fate, but his death seems imminent. This end to his story (and life) can be read as a commentary on inappropriate sexual advances. This dual message implies that both the victim and perpetrator of sexual violence suffers, but only the perpetrator is punished.

Andrew Klavan's *The Last Thing that I Remember* is another socially conservative text in this survey. In this text, Klavan constructs an idealized version of conservative adolescence. Charlie, the text's protagonist, is popular among his peers, albeit somewhat unrealistically. Rather than being mocked for a karate demonstration he gives during a school assembly, as would arguably happen in reality, his peers warmly receive Charlie's activity, and the object of his crush, Beth, even compliments his martial arts prowess. Beth is the epitome of what a heterosexual young man would want in a girlfriend; she is attractive, kind, and complimentary. Beth and Charlie never engage in sexual activity, and Beth was abstinent in her other romantic relationship depicted in the book. Chaste, impressed by karate, rational, and loyal to Charlie even after his conviction, Beth is undoubtedly the "perfect girl" for a certain demographic of teenage males who would be drawn to Klavan's books. Beth is an exception in *The Last Thing That I Remember*, and implied as Charlie's reward for being an all-American, "good" teenage boy; every other female character in this text is portrayed in a negative manner, such as physically unattractive or mentally ill. His actions entitle him to the affection of a mentally healthy and physically attractive girl. This idea of a female romantic interest being a reward for a male protagonist's actions is not new, and remains a troubling trope. It has the potential to deleteriously influence readers' expectations for romantic relationships.

The texts in this survey do not form a body of literature with a clear, singular approach to depicting gender and romantic relationships. Thus, they do not demonstrate a clear, singular approach these authors take with respect to creating texts intended to socialize adolescents into a rigid and standardized version of evangelical Christianity. There does not seem to be a correlation between publishing house or author's gender with respect to how gender, romantic relationships, and sexuality are depicted in texts. In some texts, female characters have agency,

are assertive, and are even bellicose and physically protective of the men in their lives. In other texts, female characters defer to male characters, or are weak, mentally unstable, or serve as rewards for male protagonists. These texts range from socially progressive and feminist to very socially conservative with respect to gender roles, but their approaches to sexuality are remarkably similar. Despite this philosophical range, none of the texts in this survey depict expressions of sexuality, beyond kissing and hugging, outside of marriage in a positive manner, if these actions are mentioned at all. A number of texts contain protagonists who kiss and hug their significant others, but these encounters are chaste and do not lead to sexual intercourse. This variation between texts shapes this survey into something amorphous yet distinctly representative of the diversity present in contemporary American evangelical Christianity.

Pro-chastity messages also exist in contemporary secular young adult literature, most notably in two phenomenally popular series, *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*. The *Twilight* novels, although informed by Meyer's Mormon faith, do not contain overtly Mormon content. They contain notoriously chaste premarital relationships and an emphasis on the importance of marriage. Other novels, such as Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* series, are much less clearly influenced by religious doctrine, yet do not contain depictions of premarital sex. While the absence of this content in evangelical young adult literature is clearly aligned with, and influenced by, traditional Christian dogma, it also dovetails with a larger cultural tendency to omit sexually explicit material in young adult literature. Perhaps this is a reflection of a general cultural reluctance to provide hormonal adolescents with texts that will further stoke the fires that adults fear are in their loins, providing them with material adults fear will lead to behavior adults do not want to encourage in adolescents.



## Reflecting Realities: Sociopolitical Orientations in Evangelical Christian Young Adult

### Literature

Some texts in this survey have clear philosophical and demonstrate a surprising range of political alignments, and it is difficult to separate sociopolitical content from secular culture. One cannot discuss the sociopolitical content of a text without considering the text's cultural milieu; for example, it is impossible, and unreasonable, to not discuss how texts interrogate issues surrounding privilege bestowed upon people based on their gender and ethnicity, feminism, or the effect post-9/11 anxieties had on Americans during the early twenty-first century. It is also important to consider the flow of ideas between evangelical and secular cultures because it further demonstrates that these texts do not exist in a vacuum, and they reflect—and at times distort—the events in secular culture contemporary to the production of these texts.

I argue that *The Princess Spy*, *Shadow Chaser*, *The Candlestone*, *Curse of the Spider King*, *The Mirror of N'de*, and *Beyond the Summerland* are socially progressive texts, and feature, to varying degrees, feminist influences. These texts feature female protagonists who are unapologetically strong willed, assertive, and do not defer to men, and they are praised for these traits. They feature platonic, familial, or romantic relationships that are egalitarian. These texts do not contain content that would potentially undermine Christian interpretations of gender and relationships. Despite the fact that they still clearly hew to more traditional evangelical interpretations of gender and sexuality, these texts demonstrate an understanding and acceptance of less traditional approaches to these topics. These six texts are only a portion of those included in this survey, and represent only one end of a spectrum of evangelical interpretations of gender and relationships. This diversity in evangelical young adult literature reflects that culture's heterogeneity (with respect to select topics). Although these texts range from progressive to

conservative with respect to social and political issues, most share what perhaps is best described as “standard Christian morality,” or a general emphasis on characters adhering to fundamental Christian ethical standards as established in the Ten Commandments. Klavan’s protagonists, who defy authority figures, initially appear to deviate from this paradigm. Their rebellious behavior is in the pursuit of a greater good (and promoting conservative sociopolitical values), and therefore less morally problematic for conservative readers.

Texts that present socially and politically conservative viewpoints require more discussion because of the ways in which they embed conservative messages intended to reach an audience that might not yet be politically aware or active. These texts contain views that most individuals outside of evangelical Christianity might consider representative of the entire evangelical community, in part due to more socially and politically conservative evangelicals’ ability to better amplify their voices and disseminate messages. Klavan’s texts, *Crazy Dangerous* and *The Last Thing I Remember* are also easy to categorize, and exist in and represent the most sociopolitically conservative end of the political spectrum. Klavan interrogates privilege in another way, although I doubt he did so intentionally.

Most of the texts in this survey do not contain commentary on contemporary geopolitics. Klavan is an Edgar Award-winning author and has written evangelical and more secular-leaning texts and for adult and young adult audiences. His critical and commercial success reflect the currents present in post-9/11 American media and culture. Klavan’s views in *Crazy Dangerous* and *The Last Thing I Remember* further expose the anxieties present in the decade immediately after September 11, 2001, as well as the ways in which various media informed adolescents’ (and adults’) views of individuals who exist outside of American evangelical communities. Notably, *The Last Thing I Remember* depicts Islam and Muslims in troubling ways. “Islamists”

are the antagonists in *The Last Thing I Remember* (326). These terms are more likely to be heard on the lips of Fox News commentators than contemporary American adolescents. Klavan's decision to make a controversial, militant, violent incarnation of a non-Christian faith the villain of his novel indicates his political leanings, as well as the sociopolitical views that he wants his readers to adopt. This message is problematic for obvious reasons. By not explaining the difference between "Islamofascists" and Muslims, Klavan's message is socially and politically irresponsible, and encourages readers to demonize all adherents of an often mischaracterized and misunderstood religion. It also aligns with the prevailing negative stereotype of conservative evangelicals' sociopolitical views, and is reinforced by other aspects of the texts. Antagonists in both texts practice religions that conservative evangelicals find threatening—Satanism (mischaracterized as an occult religion focused on actual devil worship, rather than the more humanistic tenets of the actual religion, in *Crazy Dangerous*) and Islam (*The Last Thing I Remember*), which are often mischaracterized, misunderstood, and demonized by American archconservatives. Thus, the antagonists are the inverted version of the protagonists on the most basic philosophical level. Klavan's protagonists thrive because of their privilege; they can challenge and evade law enforcement without dire consequences, knowing that they are innocent and correct.

Klavan's texts in this survey also echo popular politically conservative talking points regarding liberal political views and purity culture. In addition to the misogynist and heteronormative content in *Crazy Dangerous* and *The Last Thing I Remember*, Klavan is broadly dismissive of, even hostile to, liberals and academics. In *The Last Thing I Remember*, a character states that a student should submit work that an instructor expects, even if it conflicts with her or his own beliefs, if one wants to pass a course. These texts are also jingoistic, and *The Last Thing*

*I Remember* contains anachronistically anti-communist rhetoric. Surprisingly, Klavan also depicts the American legal system as corrupt in this text. In *The Last Thing I Remember*, the protagonist is convicted of a murder for which he was framed; in *Crazy Dangerous*, the police department is depicted as ineffective and incompetent. This tacit instruction to disobey civil authorities if one deems them unworthy of obedience is an intriguing yet troubling message to impart to an adolescent audience comprised of individuals currently at a developmental stage at which they are likely exasperated by, and wary of, authority figures in general.

Other texts contain similar politically and socially conservative themes. In *Hangman's Curse*, twins Elisha and Elijah argue with the individuals in their public school classrooms about the veracity of evolution and moral relativism, respectively, and liberal individuals are snide and condescending. *The Encore* also features socially conservative content. Underage drinking and parties are dangerous, and sexual assault survivors deserved their trauma. In *Magna*, a generally apolitical text, the protagonist states that she “worked with the coordinator of the Right to Life 5k,” a less-than-subtle hint at the author’s anti-abortion views (O’Dell 12).

Some texts address sociopolitical issues in a nuanced manner. *The Mirror of N’de*, inspired by the Book of Esther, examines income inequality and its attendant problems. This text also provides cautionary tales regarding genetic experimentation, which are relevant topics to readers who live in a world in which animal cloning and genetically modified crops exist. A young adult text tackling these important cultural issues is impressive and indicates that the author understands that adolescents are intellectually capable of contemplating such topics. It indicates Malone’s understanding that adolescents should be informed members of their communities, capable of discussing culturally relevant subjects. It is by no means groundbreaking. *The Hunger Games*, the first book of which was published in 2008 (three years

before *The Mirror of N'de*) interrogates similar topics, including both income inequality, such as the economic differences between the districts and the Capitol, and genetically modified creatures, such as jabberjays. However, Malone's discussion of this subject matter creates an arguably more thought-provoking text because she manages to blend discussions of sociopolitical, scientific, and religious themes into a coherent text, which Suzanne Collins does not do in *The Hunger Games*. Malone's *The Mirror of N'de* follows a long tradition of using religious themes to elucidate cultural issues, using the spiritual to frame the secular. C.S. Lewis' *Naria* also used this approach, although it is less sociopolitically oriented than *The Mirror of N'de*.

In addition to providing insight into their authors' beliefs, some of the texts in this survey also shed light on the relationship between evangelical entertainment and secular popular culture. Many of the texts include references to secular popular culture, and this challenges the evangelical claim that the community exists "in the world, but not of the world." These authors do not create texts in environments free of secular culture's influence. References to secular cultural artifacts and famous individuals makes texts set in early twenty-first century America more verisimilitudinous. If texts did not contain these references, they would seem starkly removed from their readers' actual experiences as members of American culture, thus rendering the texts less appealing and relatable. These references also help break down the purportedly stark boundary between evangelical and secular culture that threatens to alienate adolescents, who are at a precarious time in their social development and may not want to engage in activities that alienate them from their peers. Consequently, these references to secular culture in evangelical literature function in multiple ways. The references contextualize a text's plot for readers by discussing cultural artifacts with which they are familiar. These references allow

readers to identify more readily with the text's protagonist, and the text demonstrates that evangelical culture and secular culture can coexist. This latter function of secular references can allow evangelical adolescents to feel less alienated in secular American culture, and renders these texts into something the reader would not be embarrassed consume around her peers.

Pop culture references appear frequently in Jenny B. Jones's *There You Find Me*. These references include publications and authors, such as *OK* magazine, *People* magazine, *Twilight*, and Stephen King; and cultural phenomena and figures like the Academy Awards, Justin Bieber, Black Eyed Peas, Hello Kitty, Kings of Leon, and Brad Pitt. The references to these products and performers makes sense; the protagonist spends a great deal of time around a movie star, so her knowledge of popular culture seems necessary and germane to the plot, not forced into the text in an attempt to make the story relevant and relatable to adolescent readers.

Other texts in this survey contain a number of references to popular culture phenomena. *Shadow Chaser* contains references to popular secular musical artists Justin Bieber and Taylor Swift. *Curse of the Spider King* include references to Batman, as well as secular films *Indiana Jones* and *Star Wars*. *The Encore* also contains references to secular texts. These media, *13 Going on 30* and *Alias*, which reflect the text's romantic and female focus. *The Candlestone* also contains references to secular films *Braveheart*, *Planet of the Apes*, and *Lord of the Rings*, as well as Fred Flintstone. Some texts in this survey feature so many product names that one wonders if the authors received corporate sponsorship. *Curse of the Spider King* includes references to secular media. Perhaps debunking some myths readers might have concerning the Amish lifestyle, *Running Around (And Such)* contains a number of reference to modern day cleaning and hygiene products, as well as nonalcoholic beverages, but it does not contain references to popular culture figures or products, such as Clearasil, Clorox, Coke, and Pepsi.

Even Klavan's very sociopolitically conservative texts contains a number of references to popular culture, including Facebook and *Sports Illustrated*. *Magna* contains no references to secular media, but it contains a reference to popular clothing retailer Old Navy.

Some texts include reference to popular culture phenomena in ways that undermine the texts' realism or hint at the authors' lack of familiarity with how adolescents would consume secular media. In *The Last Thing I Remember*, Klavan generally does not discuss popular culture; however, he mentions *Star Trek* and George Strait. George Strait's music seems like an implausible choice of entertainment for Charlie, a teenage boy, but it dovetails with the text's focus on conservative patriotism. The country music industry, largely, is conservative; nevertheless, mentioning George Strait, not a younger artist like Toby Keith, is a perplexing authorial choice. It makes Charlie seem much older than he is supposed to be. On the other hand, the reference to *Star Trek*, presents other issues. Although the exact iteration of *Star Trek* Charlie watches on YouTube is unknown, it is a notoriously progressive franchise. An adolescent's interest in science fiction does is realistic, but the protagonist's interest in media that promotes socially progressive beliefs seems at odds with the text's otherwise archconservative content.

*Chaos* also contains curious references to secular popular culture. In this text, Las Vegas and Earth in general in the year 2033 are referred to as "hell" (Dekker 7). In *Chaos*, Dekker mentions one actual television show—*Star Trek*—and creates his own version of the secular world, based on secular texts and products. *Chaos* features an awards show called the "VH2 Awards," clearly based on the long-existing music channel VH1, at which singer Tony Montana performs (Dekker 108). The name Tony Montana is a curious choice. One wonders if it is a coincidence, or if this character, who does not appear to be an antagonist, is intended to conjure images of *Scarface* in readers' minds. Both explanations have flaws, and assessing them falls

along generational lines. It seems unlikely that Dekker would not be familiar with Brian De Palma's famous film. One wonders if the adolescent readers drawn to *Chaos* would be familiar with *Scarface* and make a connection between these characters. This seems unlikely, but not impossible.

Similarly, *Curse of the Spider King* appears to have been inspired by actual popular culture phenomena, but the authors, Batson and Hopper, do not explicitly state these influences. In this text, a group of belligerent, sword-toting antagonists in *Curse of the Spider King* are named "the Gwar" (332). One cannot be certain whether the authors named the heavy metal band with notoriously (fake) gory live shows. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that Batson and Hopper, or their editor, never conducted an Internet search of the name "Gwar" before assigning it to a group of characters. One cannot be certain if adolescent evangelical readers would be familiar with the band Gwar, but this lack of familiarity is not relevant; authors embed obscure references to individuals, texts, and so on with relative frequency, either as a tribute to the reference entity or as a nod to members of the audience who are familiar with it.

The influence of secular literary texts on evangelical authors and their texts' plots is also apparent. Evangelical authors borrow generic conventions from secular authors. L.K. Malone, author of *The Mirror of N'de*, states that scholarship "about the Harry Potter series started me thinking about Christian allegory" (Malone 325).<sup>7</sup> Other texts are influenced by secular culture and texts, but their authors do not openly state so. Jerel Law, author of *Shadow Chaser*, does not state whether he has read the *Harry Potter* novels or viewed the films. He is clearly aware of the series' themes, plot development, and characters. As noted in the gender section, the influence of

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<sup>7</sup> Arguably, her nom de plume also reflects this influence, as it is similar to the name under which J.K. Rowling writes.



*Harry Potter* on the development of characters in *Shadow Chaser*, specifically Eliza, is clear. Furthermore, the “combat” classes depicted in the texts are strikingly similar to Dumbledore’s Army, which appears in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, and the exams the characters must take are similar to the challenges in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. The Convent of Saint John of the Empty Tomb, the convent in which the angel school is located is a boarding school like Hogwarts, complete with descriptions of students’ supernatural genealogies. Law uses the term “quarterling” (51), rather than “half-blood” or “mudblood,” used in the *Harry Potter* texts. Angels, not ghosts like in *Harry Potter*, teach classes. Eliza, the protagonist’s sister, is a bookish know-it-all, much like Harry Potter’s friend Hermione Granger. Lastly, but significantly, *Shadow Chaser*’s young characters fight evil Abaddon, much like Harry and his friends fight Voldemort.

*There You’ll Find Me* also borrows heavily from twenty-first century secular young adult literature. Characters mention *Twilight* in the text, but the series’ influence is evident in other aspects of the text. The protagonist, Finley, is insecure about her looks and chances at a relationship with Beckett, which mirrors a large portion of Bella Swan’s ruminations about her relationship with Edward Cullen in the *Twilight* series. *Twilight* is a perplexingly popular text, and one with which both Finley and *There You’ll Find Me*’s readers would be familiar. Furthermore, Finley describes Beckett in god-like, angelic terms, similar to those Bella uses to describe Edward. References to *Twilight* in the text are verisimilitudinous, and Finley’s descriptions of Beckett, while exaggerated like of Edward in *Twilight*, mirror the anxious insecurity and intense infatuation that often accompanies romantic interest in adolescence.

Other texts’ secular influences are not overtly stated, but still apparent. *Hangman’s Curse*’s premise, two teenagers who, with their parents, investigate paranormal incidents, is

essentially an evangelical version of *The X-Files*, the popular television drama that broadcast new episodes during 1993-2002 and 2016. The book, written in 2001, also reflects the political milieu in which it was written. When one reads that the Veritas that reports to the President of the United States, who wanted to establish a team to “investigate and solve strange mysteries, crimes, and occurrences...from a biblical, Judeo-Christian perspective,” it is not difficult to contextualize this with Bush 43’s extremely evangelical, sociopolitically conservative views and Administration (Peretti 1). Other texts in this survey borrow plot structures and ideas from secular or non-Christian texts. *The Princess Spy* based on the fairy tale “The Frog Prince” (“My Books”). *The Candlestone* mentions King Arthur, the Holy Grail, and Camelot.

References to musical artists, media, or parodies of them can function as a way of further populating a text’s universe. By inserting actual cultural figures into texts, authors make the text more verisimilitudinous, enabling readers to better relate to characters and identify with them. An unfortunate aspect of this stylistic choice is that it forces the text to exist in a specific time and place; arguably, references to adolescents consuming the *Twilight* series and music by Justin Bieber and Taylor Swift will only resonate with members of certain generations. Music can function as an aspect of setting, and it is a relatively quick and easy way to expand the reader’s understanding of the universe in which the protagonist lives. Country, pop, rap, and rock are distinct genres with their own associated cultures, norms, and traditions. Identifying a character with a specific performer immediately informs any but the most sheltered reader about the protagonist’s cultural location, generalized media preferences, and a broad generalization of the character’s personality type. These references can also destroy a character’s plausibility. Klavan depicting Charlie in *The Last Thing I Remember* as a George Strait fan makes the protagonist

seem older than the plot details would dictate he is, and he is rendered laughably—and unrealistically—different than his peers based on this musical preference.

Similarly, some texts, whether parodied or explicitly referenced, can cause generational confusion. Not all adolescent readers might not understand allusions to *Scarface*, but a subset of adolescents might be familiar with this text. (The fact that the Tony Montanas in *Chaos* and *Scarface* are significantly different might make readers' ignorance of popular cultural references unimportant.) However, some texts, such as *Indiana Jones*, *Star Trek*, and *Star Wars*, mentioned in other texts in this survey, are ubiquitous and not plagued by the issue of potential reader ignorance. Despite being decades older than most of the members of these novels' intended audience, these texts are well known and their inclusion does not threaten to confuse any readers, except for the most sheltered adolescents in American culture. Likewise, because these texts are perennial favorites, references to them are unlikely to age poorly and make novels in which they appear seem dated or antiquated to future readers. That evangelical adolescents would be able to navigate through these secular popular culture references and still maintain their faith is a testament to the idea that the boundary between evangelical and secular culture is permeable. That an author would be comfortable inserting secular popular culture references into a text, and a Christian publisher would distribute it, demonstrates that secular culture is not universally viewed as something that is inherently dangerous and from which impressionable adolescents should be protected.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> There are, of course, exceptions to this statement. More conservative branches of evangelical Christianity, such as very conservative evangelical movements, including the Quiverfull movement, very carefully patrol and censor media, maintaining a suspicious view of secular culture. It seems highly unlikely that individuals with these philosophical views would allow adolescents in their community to consume any text, even one published by a Christian company, that contains references to, or displays a comfort with, secular popular culture.

Other texts display influences from other religious and cultural traditions. As mentioned earlier, *The Orphan King*'s entire plot focuses on Druids. *Beyond the Summerland*'s title, name for the divine, and name for the marriage ceremony hint at authorial familiarity with non-Christian religious traditions and specifically neopaganism. This impressive array of influences that inform the texts in this survey speaks to the ways in which evangelical culture, other religious traditions in America, and secular American popular culture have contact and influence each other. One wonders what more sociopolitically conservative authors would think of the clear non-Christian influences on texts produced for an evangelical audience. These influences seem to be at odds with what I perceive to be an evangelical authors' goal, to socialize adolescents into the evangelical community by providing them with entertaining yet theologically informed and didactic texts. By depicting protagonists of other religious traditions, the authors tacitly state that the division between Christian and Other is relatively insignificant, and that one does not have to be a Christian to be a good person. In turn, this seems to undermine, or at least render irrelevant, the entire endeavor of affirming adolescents' Christian faith and socializing them into the evangelical community.

The inclusion or parody of these products and public figures demonstrates that the authors of these texts are aware of secular popular culture, and that they assume that their adolescent readers are as well. Evangelicals are not cloistered, existing in self-imposed sequestration from the rest of American culture. They actively participate in and consume products of it. The potential downside of all of these references is that they date the texts, making it unlikely for them to age well and be equally meaningful to future generations of readers. While these references are relevant to contemporary readers, they do not ensure longevity or posterity.

Authors must balance the need to appeal to their target audiences with a concern for their texts' longevity. This preoccupation is by no means peculiar to evangelical or young adult literature.

## **Conclusion**

This sampling of texts demonstrates that evangelical authors do not adopt or promote a single, uniform orientation toward, or away from, religiously influenced interpretations of gender roles, romantic relationships, sociopolitical views, and popular and secular culture. This result is not shocking, despite evangelicals' proclivity for claiming that they exist in a state that is parallel, if not opposed, to secular culture. Evangelicals do not exist in a vacuum. They are subject to secular influences, which appear in and influence the texts they create. The philosophical and sociopolitical orientations present in secular culture certainly will also appear in evangelical culture. The amount of cultural contact demonstrated in these texts implies a certain level of comfort with and in secular culture. I posit that evangelicals create these texts adolescents in their community more pious entertainment options, but neither the authors nor their readers can escape the influence popular and secular culture have on their lives. It is intellectually dishonest to claim that these authors and their audiences never have contact with secular culture. This survey of texts demonstrates how evangelicals—whether authors or readers—are bicultural, and that they in a liminal state between their religious and secular cultures.

Additionally, this corpus demonstrates that evangelical authors, despite their differences with respect to philosophical or sociopolitical orientation, labor to create texts that in some fundamental way reinforce their broad religious convictions. This is evidence of an impulse these authors share to create texts that function in a way to socialize a new generation of Christians.

These texts' diversity of views is their unifying characteristic. The fact that these authors do not share a uniform interpretation of evangelical Christianity further affirms the fact that the evangelical community is not monolithic. The authors might attempt, either consciously or unconsciously, to create didactic texts that help teach young Christians how to function in their faith community, but readers who consume multiple texts receive a much broader education with respect to how they are expected to interpret Christian theology and live as evangelical Christians in contemporary American culture. This unintended lesson is perhaps the one that is most relevant to twenty first-century evangelical adolescents: their faith community is a big tent, and one in which anyone can find a place if she or he is willing to look. "Evangelical" as an ideology is not inflexible, but rather a gestalt comprised of a few key beliefs and a plethora of interpretations of them.

## Chapter 2

### **Drawing Near to God: Secular and Sociopolitical Influences in Christian Comics**

Comic books and graphic novels, which comprise a genre I will refer to simply as “comics,” enjoy an enduring popularity among a range of age, gender, and socioeconomic categories, which reflects the genre’s wide appeal. The genre’s ability to adapt to other media and shape ideas is likewise apparent in American culture. One need only read the marquee at a movie theater or look at the program listings on Netflix and network and cable television to appreciate the ways in which comics have shaped American culture and media. Superman, Batman, the X-Men, Jessica Jones—these comic characters have captured Americans’ attention for years, and they have influenced the production of various media, including film and television texts. Despite this popularity, comics face prejudice and criticism as a genre. Scott McCloud, who literally wrote the book on interpreting comics, writes in *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, observes, “Words and pictures together are considered, at best, a diversion for the masses, at worst a product of crass commercialism” (140). He also discusses that the integration of images with text is often associated with children’s books, and “‘real’ books [are] those with no pictures at all” (140). Nevertheless, it remains a popular genre, perhaps because it provides readers with multiple ways of entering a story and receiving a narrative.

The size of comics as a genre, and the diversity present in it, also complicates any attempt to craft a streamlined definition for it. Numerous subgenres of comics exist, yet few precise terms to describe specific illustration styles present in subgenres. According to Cindy Jackson, Library Specialist for Comic Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University’s James Branch Cabell Library, few precise terms for specific types of comics art exist (telephone interview). Although it is not very descriptive, something as simple as “artistic style of a superhero comic” must

suffice when discussing the appearance of a specific text. Likewise, a term like “manga,” a specific Japanese style of comics art, is not very descriptive. In both cases, these terms will enable readers to visualize the artistic style of a text because they refer to generic conventions widely used in subgenres of comics.

I borrow from McCloud’s definition to construct a more global definition of comics regardless of their artistic style. He notes that comics are “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the view” (9). Comics include panels, the space in which text and graphics are displayed, which includes speech bubbles that contain dialog, and gutters, the space between panels. These elements combine to create texts in which art and text are combined in sequential order to create a narrative (Jackson, telephone interview, 19 July 2016).

McCloud provides a good working definition for the genre in general. For this dissertation’s purposes, I must further refine this definition to capture the religious aspects of the texts I analyzed for this project. For this, I borrow from religious studies scholar Kate Netzler’s discussion of the topic. She notes that Christian comics focus on themes and stories that emphasize the importance of having faith in God; reinforce traditional Christian ideas regarding morality, which render the comics’ content relatively free from profanity, sexuality, and violence; and have a clear evangelical perspective and intention (219). Netzler also notes that those who create Christian comics are more interested in presenting “a religious worldview for the sake of evangelism” than in inspiring questions regarding Christian theology and dogma (219). To further refine this definition, I include the observation that Christian comics can focus on a number of historical periods and on various types of characters, and can depict fictional or nonfictional events and persons.



Christian comics span a number of decades, but they are best understood through the genre's connection to other graphic arts. Christian comics are another example in a long history of humans using the graphic arts to depict and disseminate religious and cultural ideas. This impulse to tell stories visually is nearly as old as humanity itself, and can be traced through several cultures, including the individuals who painted in the Chauvet cave, ancient Egyptians who depicted their pantheon of gods on palettes, and the Maya who carved intricate reliefs. Graphic art has also had a long history specifically in Christianity. Medieval illuminated manuscripts, stained glass windows, and even the Sistine Chapel's famous frescoes, in many ways, are precursors to twenty-first-century Christian comic books.

The use of graphic arts to create religious texts is logical, especially if creating content that must explain dense concepts, and based on that art form's potential for instruction. Robert S. Petersen, art history professor at Eastern Illinois University, notes that "graphic narratives often have a didactic quality in the way they seem to moralize about the actions they depict—either to extol some virtue or, through a negative example, to display some contemptible behavior" (xvi). A. David Lewis, a comics scholar and graphic novelist, argues in *American Comics, Literary Theory, and Religion: The Superhero Afterlife* that "[t]here is no requirement that genre provide positive and productive models of morality, unfortunately, nor must the models it does provide have to demonstrate a particular degree of impact" (21). These statements at first seem to be at odds; but upon closer analysis, they dovetail in a way that directly speaks to Christian comics' didactic and entertainment value.

When a religious group uses an art form to encode religious messages, tensions arise. While some evangelicals maintain that their religious beliefs set them apart from the secular world, adopting a genre with a storied secular history challenges that assertion. At best, it makes

evangelicals seem shortsighted; at worst, it is self-deluding. Additionally, as Netzler notes, evangelicals, who are part of a “religious tradition that prides itself on relevancy in a changing world should be continually reinterpreting the ways that message is communicated and not merely transplanting the same content into different forms” (228). Netzler argues that finding a balance between maintaining a Christian message and a discomfort with experimenting with art forms is necessary for Christian comic artists; they must do so in order to better explore their “evangelistic or artistic potential” (228). Netzler argues that evangelical Christianity and the comic book medium as a whole will benefit from an increased dialog about religion in popular culture, as well as the impact this relationship has on both artists and readers (228).

In *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels*, A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer, a religious studies and popular culture scholar, describe this potential conflict. They state that “comics rub uncomfortably against the Protestant heritage that so influenced the United State in its first few centuries,” and note that while comics “fuse words and images in complex combinations that frequently give images the final authority” (2). This conflicts with Reformation-era and Enlightenment Protestantism, which held scripture as the highest authority and “maintain[ed] a certain suspicion of images as being overly sensual” (2). This argument is cogent, and contemporary American evangelical culture certainly privileges scripture over interpretation, at least overtly. Nevertheless, Lewis and Kraemer’s argument is archaic. It is shortsighted to think that contemporary American Protestant Christians cannot simultaneously revere the Bible and approve of artistic interpretations of Scripture. In addition to not being factual, this interpretation of American Protestants portrays them as reactionary and intolerant. While some American evangelicals are certainly both reactionary and intolerant, this

is not the hallmark of the entire community and it does not inform their visceral response to graphic art that does not contain theologically problematic content.

Comics were first published in the nineteenth century, and Christian comics were a notable presence from the genre's nascence. Nonetheless, Christian comics in this era were markedly different than they are today, focusing on depicting biblical stories and themes, with "much of their text coming directly from scripture" (Netzler 221). Artists who created early Christian comics were more concerned with "the evangelistic possibilities of juxtaposing pictures with words than with exploring the artistic nuances of a new medium" (Netzler 221). As comics evolved as a genre, so, too, did Christian comics. While some texts focused on exegesis and scriptural content still exist, "in the last two decades there has been a move toward the creation of unique stories and visual reinterpretations of the Christian message for a new generation" (Netzler 221). Christian publishing companies saw a market emerging for these texts, and some companies, like Zondervan and PowerMark Comics, have adopted marketing strategies that are similar to those of secular comic book publishers (Netzler 221).

Christian comics are another example in a long tradition of Christians adopting secular media and using it to disseminate religious concepts, a larger phenomenon that this dissertation explicates. Netzler observes that Christians often produce a religiously informed version of a secular product. While it is common for companies to claim that their products are superior, texts with religious content possess moral and ethical components that appeal to certain consumers. Netzler notes that "the concept of an alternative also implies that there is a degree of visual similarity between two versions of the same medium and that the only significant difference is the content" (222). The creation of an alternative Christian version of a ubiquitous secular medium also implies that secular media are dangerous (223). This idea, that secular

cultural products are capable of distracting naïve adolescents from their religious convictions, provides the philosophical foundation for the creation of alternative media specifically for Christians. Netzler notes that the “Christian comic book is undergoing...an identity crisis” (225). These artists and authors must create original content that captures audience members’ attention and imagination, but this content must also be overtly Christian. It must “bridge the gap between evangelism and entertainment and between glorifying God and contributing to the comic book medium” (225). This is a difficult balance to maintain, and it is fraught with issues with respect to the specific expectations and messages that secular artists and authors do not encounter.

A brief overview of Christian comics’ rich history as a genre provides one with an appreciation of the genre’s scope, history, and the ways in which Christian comics artists have had cultural contact with secular comics. Christian Comics International’s website<sup>9</sup> is an invaluable resource for cataloging these texts, which span a range of subgenres. Jack Chick’s infamous Chick Tracks are perhaps the first example that comes to mind when contemplating evangelical comics, but it is merely one example of a diverse genre. Christian Cartoons and Gospel Cartoons commenced publication in the 1920s and 1930s, respectively, providing early examples of Christian comics intended for an adolescent audience. The 1950s ushered in comics series branded with then-famous media evangelists, including “Billy Graham Presents” Series and the “Oral Roberts’ True Stories” Series. In the 1970s, a number of religiously-oriented Archie comics and the Dennis and the Bible Kids” series were published, signaling a comfort evangelicals have with secular entertainment. *Treasure Chest*, which also featured *This Godless Communism*, was published from 1946 until 1972, providing American adolescents with religious and politically infected instruction. Spire Christian Comics existed from 1972 until

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.christiancomicsinternational.org/cci\\_home.html](http://www.christiancomicsinternational.org/cci_home.html)

1988. *Sunday Pix* (rechristened *Pix* in the 1990s) commenced publication in the late 1940s, creating content intended for religious adolescents.

The Christian comics continue to thrive as a genre, with a number of other publishers releasing work. These publishers include Abacus, Concordia Publishing, David C. Cook, Herald Press, Kingstone Comics (a division of Kingstone Media), Kregel Publications, Moody Press, No Greater Joy Ministries, Seabury Books, Tyndale (and Tyndale Momentum), Thomas Nelson,<sup>10</sup> Urban Ministries, Inc., WaterBrook Press, and Zondervan (and the company's children's literature imprint, Zonderkidz).<sup>11</sup> Additionally, secular Marvel Comics created a Christian Classics series. While I do not count Christian-themed Marvel comics as "Christian" comics, they are noteworthy because they demonstrate the historical evidence of ongoing contact between religious and secular media and topics, and exemplify the general tension between religious and secular media. Both draw inspiration from each other; the boundary between religious and secular media seem simultaneously porous and impenetrable. Christian comics artists have also ventured into new media, a genre that includes webcomics like Adam4d.com.

A Christian Comic Arts Society also exists, providing Christian artists with an opportunity to display their work and offer each other support and critiques. A number of artists on this site create fan art of secular characters like Superman and Wolverine. These pictures do not seem to have any Christian content; they are simply tributes to secular characters. This secular content's presence on an overtly Christian site that celebrates and promotes Christian comic art is simultaneously perplexing, because it clearly refers to secular culture that one would assume would not be acceptable, and intellectually honest, because these artists are tacitly

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Nelson is owned by HarperCollins Publishers, a secular publishing company.

<sup>11</sup> Zondervan is owned by HarperCollins Publishers, a secular publishing company.

admitting that their is influenced by secular texts. This influence is also apparent in the artistic style in all comics and graphic novels reviewed for this chapter.

It is difficult to determine an exact number of English-language<sup>12</sup> Christian graphic novels published by American Christian companies during the twenty-first century. First, the rise of independent means of publishing and distributing texts complicates attempts to quantify this genre. Secondly, publishers can be, perhaps unintentionally, misleading about their products. While a Google search for Tyndale and comics yields several results, including texts for sale on Amazon.com, a representative from Tyndale responded to my inquiry regarding this matter by stating that the company does not publish comic books or graphic novels (Tyndale House Publishers Customer Service). Thus, I concede that my estimation of the size of Christian comics and graphic novels as a genre might not be entirely accurate. Regardless of this potential discrepancy, it appears that in the twenty-first century, 119 English-language texts were published by a number of corporate (not self-publishing) publishing houses, listed earlier in this chapter.<sup>13</sup>

Christian comic creators seem simultaneously aware of their secular influences, yet troubled enough by their existence to attempt to create an alternative for Christians. Netzler observes that artists in the Community Comics exhibit “signs of unease” with respect to this tension. These artists are understandably proud of their secular creative work, but they have “a sense of self-consciousness and an impulse to justify their religious position that reflects the ambivalence echoed in the larger evangelical community” (224).

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<sup>12</sup> I chose to restrict my focus to English language texts because many texts are similar, but simply translated into other languages. These are not unique texts; thus, I did not see the value of counting them as such.

<sup>13</sup> I do not count Christian-themed comics published by Marvel in this number. This includes a count of the NEXT-Tyndale texts available for sale on Amazon.com as of September 2016. It excludes non-English translated texts of the same titles.

Appreciating this tension is fundamental to understanding Christian comics as a genre. Netzler notes that investigating the “cultural roots” of Christian comics allows one to also investigate the “cultural divide between the ideas of secular and sacred in American Christianity” (219). It is this constant struggle between the Christian content and the comic book form that defines both the appearance and marketing of Christian comic books today and points to an ambiguous future for Christian popular culture” (219).

This chapter includes a survey of ten graphic novels published by American companies during the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century. Each text highlights a different aspect of contemporary Christian comics and provides insight into a different aspect of contemporary American Christianity. I divide these texts into three main categories: adaptations of the Bible, didactic texts, and fiction. The first category includes four texts, all adaptations of biblical stories. Two texts, *The Action Bible* and *Manga Bible: New Living Translation*, are adaptations of a number of biblical stories, but these texts differ significantly in their form and content. *Judith: Captive to Conqueror* is a manga adaptation of the eponymous Apocryphal book. *Messiah, Volume 1: Origin* provides a narrative of Jesus’ early life, harmonized from the Gospels. The second category also includes four texts, each discussing different historical, doctrinal, or exegetical topics. *The Book of God* presents a history of the Bible and its authors, as well as information regarding biblical translations. *101 Questions about the Bible, Volume 1* functions as an exegetical text, providing interpretations of biblical passages to answer modern day questions. *Luther: Echoes of the Hammer* recounts the life story of Martin Luther, a seminal figure of the Protestant Reformation. The last text in this category, *Radical Jesus*, discusses the story of perhaps the most important biblical figure in Christianity, Jesus Christ; it expands the discussion beyond Jesus to the manifestation of his more politically progressive teachings

throughout Christian history. Lastly, the third section contains the only fictional texts in this survey, two graphic novels that are not based explicitly on Scripture. *Hand of the Morningstar, Volume 1: Advent* is an action-adventure comic featuring superheroes who receive their power from a mysterious being. *2048* provides readers with a glimpse into an America in the not too distant future shaped by biotechnological advances and potentially troubling resulting questions about human sexuality.

A three-step process guided the selection of these texts. First, I compiled a list of texts published between 2000-2015. Next, I chose texts based on how well they represent the diversity present in contemporary American comics, with respect to their content. Lastly, I categorized these texts based on their content. Two questions drive my analysis of Christian comics: how the medium informs the message, and how the artwork in Christian comics compares with secular counterparts. Additionally, my research focuses on questions regarding how the arrangement of panels and their content shapes texts' narratives, their connections to a larger secular tradition of similarly focused texts, and how they depict biblical passages and characters. Lastly, I discuss what, if any, political statements these texts make, and speculate how these messages could be intended to shape adolescents' worldviews and understanding of Christianity. It should be noted that some texts, such as *Judith: Captive to Conqueror* and *Radical Jesus*, are not explicitly written by evangelical authors or for an evangelical audience. The term "evangelical" is a bit nebulous, and individuals whom one might define as evangelical might not self-identify thus. Accordingly, I adopted a relatively relaxed definition with respect to "evangelical" comics for this study, in an attempt to capture texts that might appeal to, or be in harmony with, evangelical readers' religious sensibilities.



## **Adaptations of the Bible**

### ***The Action Bible***

*The Action Bible* provides readers with a graphic adaptation of select biblical stories. Compiled by “general editor” Doug Mauss and illustrated by Sergio Cariello, who has worked for Marvel Comics, DC Comics, and the Word of Life Bible Institute (752), the *Action Bible* functions similarly to medieval stained glass windows in cathedrals, illustrating biblical stories to make them easier for an audience to digest and making its content more immediately understandable. The text also includes an index of pages of Bible verses and their corresponding illustrations. *The Action Bible* fits within the larger history of adaptations of culturally important texts, like *The Iliad* (Marvel Illustrated, 2007).

An understanding of superheroes’ appeal to some readers informed Mauss’ work on this text. Indeed, Mauss’ approach seems nearly heretical as it simultaneously renders God a superhero and tacitly encourages readers to compare the Judeo-Christian god with secular superheroes. It is not new to consider the godlike powers of superheroes, or even to compare Jesus to specific superheroes, like Superman. However, Mauss very clearly wants his readers to conceptualize God in this manner, and apparently does not anticipate a doctrinal objection to this comparison. Mauss explains his approach to creating this text by comparing God with action heroes. He writes, “People don’t usually think of God like this, but God is the original action hero. Everyone is so impressed when Superman blows a car over with his breath, yet God created the whole universe with his breath. Superman may save the day with his strength, but Jesus saved the whole world with his death.” Mauss quickly conveys to his audience the idea that the Bible is not a series of old, irrelevant stories set in the ancient Near East and Mediterranean, but rather, “Here and now, today, [the Bible] inspires us to be God’s next generation of

difference-makers. The heroes in the Bible were flawed and chosen; you and I are flawed and chosen. The action you read about in these 750 pages is nothing compared to the action that will occur once you put this book down” (np). This conceptualizing of God indicates that Mauss has a rather nontraditional approach to biblical interpretation.

*The Action Bible* adapts the Bible in a way that focuses on narrative, not the sequence of the stories as presented in the books themselves. This allows Mauss to rearrange, or even edit out, content. On the surface, this approach conflicts with a basic evangelical tenet that the Bible is the inerrant, immutable, complete Word of God. In practice, though, this approach is not different than the editing that occurs when biblical passages are selected or discarded when clergy write sermons or when one must decide which stories to teach in Sunday school or bible study classes. When constructing the latter part of King David’s narrative, Mauss edits together content from 2 Samuel 18, 1 Kings 1, Psalms, and 2 Samuel 23 to provide the reader with a narrative arc of four stories telling about Absalom’s rebellion and David’s death. Interestingly, Tamar’s rape by her brother Amnon, which instigated Absalom’s rebellion, is absent from the narrative. By excluding Absalom’s desire to avenge his sister, Mauss removed numerous dramatic elements from the text, as well as an explanation for Absalom’s hatred for his brother. The story transforms into a quarrel between brothers, not a brother’s loving (if misguided) attempt to punish the man who irreparably harmed his sister.

Perhaps Mauss thought that this sexual content was too lewd for his audience. Regardless of the reasoning that prompted this excision, by excluding this part of the plot, Mauss underestimates his readers’ ability to consume troubling content and removes all emotional impact from the original story. Additionally, the idea of editing out content from the Bible is troubling. If one accepts the premise that the Bible is God-inspired, one wonders why an editor

would feel it necessary to remove a major plot point. Mauss also omits the Song of Songs in its entirety; his aversion to sexuality, as evidenced by Salome's relatively modest clothing, is clear. It also renders the text less interesting by obscuring the very human aspects of it. At other times, Mauss and Cariello insert extra-biblical content into this text. On the final page of *The Action Bible*, a full-page panel depicts Jesus knocking on a closed door. It is a maladroit attempt to remind the reader that Jesus is everywhere and waiting for individuals to let him enter into their lives. This message aligns with traditional Christian teachings, but the illustration is unnecessary.

Cariello's illustrations also add to biblical content by providing visuals that bring attention to specific details of biblical stories. Cariello uses full-page panels to emphasize important aspects of biblical stories. Examples of full-page panels include a depiction of animals getting into Noah's ark (fig. 1), the Lord's Supper (fig. 2), Jesus' execution (fig. 3), and Jesus' ascension (fig. 4). A larger panel size draws the reader's attention to these illustrations, and signals that these events are important in the Bible's overall narrative.

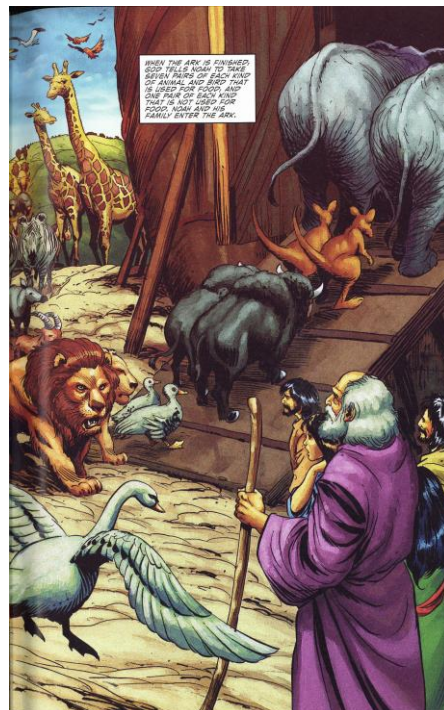


Fig. 1

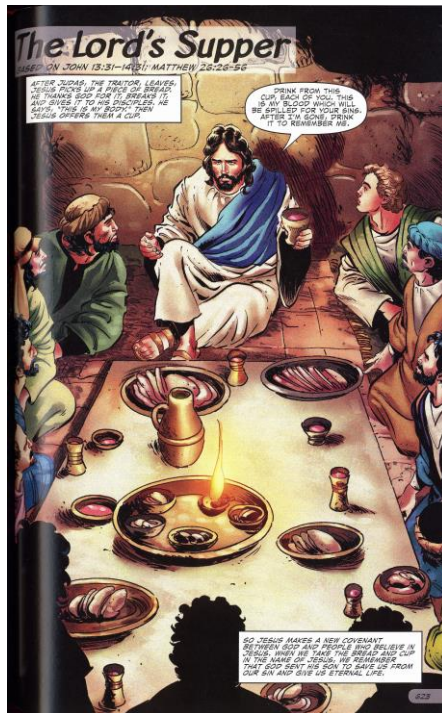


Fig. 2

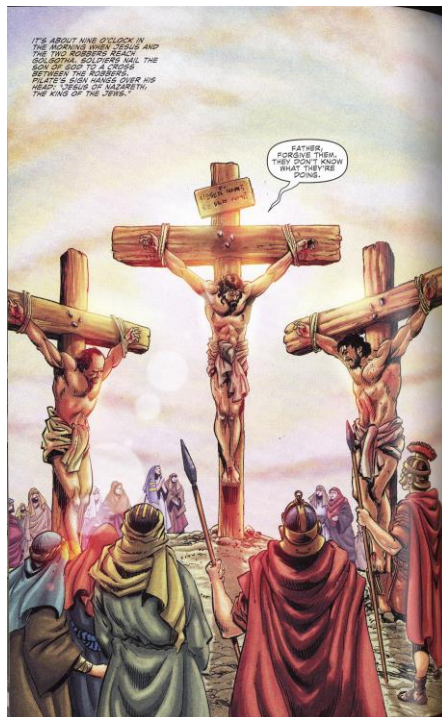


Fig. 3

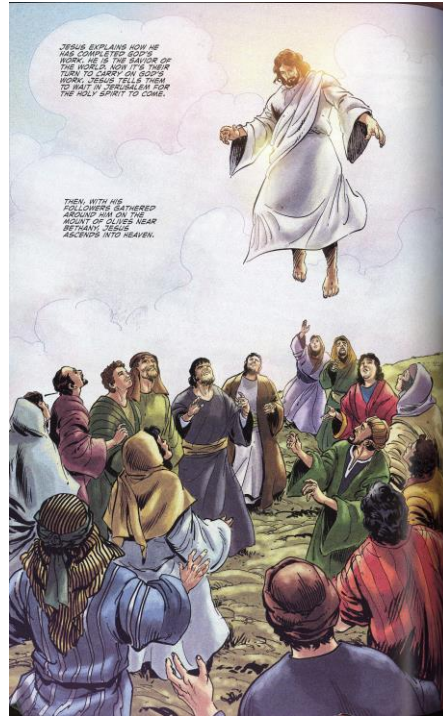


Fig. 4

Cariello uses varied panel sizes to demonstrate movement and to give the reader a sense of how quickly the events in the Book of Revelation would unfold. The two-page length of this section, spanning pages 742-743, also contributes to the reader's sense of the swiftness with which these actions occur. The art style looks kinetic, which renders the figures seemingly able to leap from the page. Jesus reaches out, hand outstretched, toward a large central panel featuring the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Jesus' hand radiates what appears to be stars, affecting reality with his supernatural power. On the text page, three page-width panels show in quick succession the outcome of this battle between good and evil. In the top panel, Jesus and his brigade of angels move toward a red dragon in the distance. In the middle panel, the red, seven-headed dragon surrounded by small figures, angels of indeterminate allegiance, appears to be hovering over a rip in space and time. Jesus, dwarfed by the dragon's size, brandishes a sword as if ready for battle (fig. 5). We do not see the actual combat between these figures; instead, in the third panel in this sequence, we see a placid garden with stream coming out of tree, the "water of

life.” We see the resulting glory, but not the gore that preceded it. This hints at an editorial perspective that God’s ultimate triumph over evil, not the exact manner in which it occurred, is the important lesson readers must learn.



Fig. 5

Cariello eschews depicting any potentially controversial material. The characters, including Jesus, do not appear to be of European descent. Jesus has olive skin, with dark hair and eyes and a prominent nose (592). Judas is not an anti-Semitic caricature (622). Avoiding further controversy, Salome, traditionally depicted as a sensual dancer at King Herod’s party, is not too scantily clad in *The Action Bible* (576). At times, Cariello’s illustrations, perhaps unintentionally, venture into potentially polemical and problematic territory. Interestingly, Samson is a man of African ancestry with dreadlocks (230). Although the Bible does not state that Samson was of African origin, and thus this portrayal is not necessarily biblically informed, it dovetails with the portrayal of Samson in the 2013 *The Bible* miniseries, which aired on The History Channel. This trend in portraying Samson can be interpreted two ways. First, and which gives the most benefit

to the content creators, is that the portrayal of Samson is an attempt to be more inclusive with respect to the long history of portraying biblical characters as Europeans. The second interpretation is less kind, and it is more problematic. Portraying Samson, who married foreign women despite the prohibition found in Deuteronomy 7, set foxes on fire and sent them into his ex-wife's wedding celebration, and beat people with the jawbone of an ass, as an African man is another example of a Western tradition of portraying African men as brutish miscreants.

*The Action Bible* does not have an overt sociopolitical message. Nevertheless, it contains literal interpretations of the Bible, such as the action in the Book of Revelation, and it omits many references to sexuality and sexual violence. Thus, one can determine that conservative principles informed Mauss' work in this text. Simultaneously, Mauss shields his readers from the depictions of sexuality present in biblical stories. This aversion to sex is common in fundamentalist Christianity, but these textual omissions deviate from the evangelical principle that the Bible must be consumed in its entirety and interpreted literally. It also provides us with the opportunity to make some broader generalizations about conservative Christians. If God provided biblical content to humans, then certainly these messages could not undermine one's faith. Omission and censorship implies that conservative Christians might not think that adolescents can handle this content, but also that they might not be entirely intellectually honest about their interpretation of the Bible.

### ***Manga Bible: New Living Translation***

*Manga Bible: New Living Translation*<sup>14</sup> is unique among the texts in this survey because it does not have a clear editor or illustrator. The absence of this information provides the text

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<sup>14</sup> The illustrations are not paginated, but the biblical text is.

with the appearance of materializing fully formed, without human intervention, aside from any human minds involved in the process of translating the text into Modern English.<sup>15</sup> In this way, it aligns itself with conservative interpretations of the Bible's origins and overlook the more human and historical aspects of Scriptural production. The seven-page introduction at the beginning of the *Manga Bible*, attributed to "The Bible Translation Committee," discusses only issues related to biblical translation, the New Living Translation (second edition). The anonymous author of this section provides no reason given for text's existence beyond translation methodology. It has the general structure, aside from illustrations, of a conventional translation of the Bible. Much like other, more "traditional" editions of the Bible, *Manga Bible* is printed on thin sheets and contains a concordance. It also contains a "365-day reading plan," which does not refer to the text's illustrations. The ninety-six pages of illustrations contained in this text seem to be an afterthought; they are inserted into the text to appeal to a different audience, thus increasing Tyndale House Publishers' potential market. This adaptation of the Bible fits with the tradition of adapting culturally important texts as graphic novels, including Marvel's adaptation of *The Iliad*. It also fits in the tradition of adapting Western literary classics into manga, including Udon Entertainment's adaptations of *Great Expectations*, *Les Miserables*, and *The Scarlet Letter*.

Manga, a Japanese form of comics, is popular among American audiences, but using this comics style is significant for other reasons. By using this genre as a means to illustrate the Bible in English—by an American company, presumably for an American audience—it tacitly comments on the centuries of culturally based aesthetic standards have influenced countless depictions of Jesus and other biblical figures. Notably, Jesus has olive skin, brown hair, wide

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<sup>15</sup> This interpretation of the Bible's history aligns with conservative evangelical interpretations of this text, which assert that the Bible is a product of God's mind, not the work of human writers and editors over the course of several centuries.



brown eyes, and a relatively narrow nose. In fact, many of the important male characters in *Manga Bible*—including Adam, Abraham, and David—share these physical characteristics. This reflects the manga generic conventions with respect to how characters are drawn, but some deviate from this style. Other characters depicted in *Manga Bible* have aquiline noses, which aligns with stereotypes with respect to Middle Eastern individuals' appearances. "European" appearances of the biblical heroes is problematic, and another instance of the aforementioned culturally based biases that have influenced Christian art for centuries.

The illustrations in *Manga Bible* are divided into three sections, each thirty-two pages long.<sup>16</sup> Only select biblical stories are illustrated. Notably, no content from the Book of Revelation appears in the illustrations, despite its importance in Christian theology. Various books are blended together to form a visual narrative, and no biblical verses are listed for illustrations. These illustrations do not appear in the same section of the Bible as their corresponding stories. The first section of illustrations does not correspond with the text in which it is inserted, appearing in 2 Samuel 23. It contains depictions of important stories, including the creation story, the Fall of Man, Noah's Ark, Sodom and Gomorrah, and Isaac's birth. However, this section omits interesting, if problematic, stories, such as Lot's incestuous relationship with his daughters and Ishmael's life. It highlights important stories, but deletes potentially offensive or controversial that might portray biblical heroes in a negative manner from the visual narrative. This approach censors the Bible, and it contradicts the evangelical philosophy that the Bible is God's inerrant Word.

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<sup>16</sup> According to tradition, Jesus lived for thirty-three years before his crucifixion, and the Protestant Bible has sixty-six books (39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament). The decision to make *Manga Bible*'s sections thirty-two pages long seems arbitrary, and like a missed opportunity to reference either the life of Christ or the number of books in the translation from which the creators drew inspiration for this adaptation.

The second section contains illustrations that depict other stories from the Old Testament, and is inserted in Isaiah 9. This section also omits potentially scandalous material. It includes Joseph's story, but does not mention his brothers' duplicitous actions that caused him to be in Egypt or his interactions with Potiphar's wife; Moses' story, but omits his murder of an Egyptian man; an overview of the Judges, including Deborah; and David's story, including a surprisingly bloodless depiction of Goliath's death by slingshot and decapitation, and no mention of Bathsheba or Uriah. The less savory aspects of biblical figures' lives are edited in favor of depicting them in a streamlined, heroic manner. Notably, Israelite women are depicted in modest clothing, but Pharaoh's daughter/Moses' adopted mother is clothed in a dress that shows off her torso. This appears to be a way to differentiate between Judeo-Christian women and sinful Others. The exclusion of Psalms, Proverbs, and Song of Solomon, as well as various prophetic books, is easier to explain and provide examples of this text's tendency toward economy in visual representation. For various reasons, these texts are difficult to adapt, they do not help provide the narrative arcs needed for Christian dogma.

The third section of illustrations discuss the annunciation of Jesus' birth; Jesus' birth, the adoration of the magi, and the Holy Family's flight to Egypt; Jesus' baptism and public ministry; crucifixion, death, and resurrection; and his appearance to the disciples and instruction that they carry on his work of disseminating his message. One wonders why the unnamed, unattributed illustrators chose these stories to depict. The selection of stories provides a very brief overview of the Bible's general narrative arc, but it excludes some well-known content. For example, the beatitudes are absent from the manga adaptation. This is perplexing as they provide a significant portion of Christian philosophy and as such would warrant visual representation. For various

reasons, these texts are difficult to adapt, they do not help provide the narrative arcs needed for Christian dogma, or they are lesser known or studied books in Christianity.

Like *The Action Bible*, *Manga Bible* omits adaptations of Psalms, Proverbs, and Song of Solomon. The persistent exclusion of Song of Solomon indicates an impulse among Christian publishers to expunge any potentially scandalous material, or perhaps difficult to explain theologically, material. This approach is simultaneously brilliant, because it reduces the potential need to interpret racy material, and intellectually dishonest and lazy, as it obfuscates the complexity of the Bible as a literary text and reduces some of the text's aesthetic and historical value.

The illustrations contain dialog that is not in the Bible. For example, Goliath calls David a "little wimp." Changes in the dialog between the biblical text and the manga adaptation occur. "Get out of here, Satan!", for example, is not something Jesus is recorded as saying in the Gospels, but it certainly would not be out of character. Jesus, for another, is called "Yeshua" in illustrations, but not in the translation of the Bible that appears on pages adjacent to the illustrations. The editor provides no explanation for this divine nomenclature, and it is a bit confusing as it brings one's attention to issues related to translation. The name Yeshua is more historically accurate, but it conflicts with other text in this edition of the Bible and with Western Christian tradition. The illustrators include historically accurate depictions elsewhere in the text. Judas is not depicted in an anti-Semitic manner. The sign on Jesus' cross, traditionally translated as "Jesus of Nazareth: King of The Jews," appears in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, but not English, in the illustration.

The artists use illustrations to communicate other messages. For example, God's speech bubbles have light blue backgrounds surrounded by rougher, darker outlines, distinguishing them

from other characters' speech. This light blue color reinforces this cultural tradition that God resides in heaven (or the sky, in a common visual shorthand for heaven). The distinct speech bubble outlines provide visual cues that establish the fundamental differences in God's and humans' speech acts, with God's bolder and demanding more attention (fig. 6, fig. 7). The illustrators draw readers' attention to the text in other ways; for example, as in *The Action Bible*, *Manga Bible* contains full-page panels that depict theologically important scenes. These include Moses descending from Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments (fig. 6), Noah giving thanks to God after the Flood ends (fig. 7), and Jesus' Crucifixion (fig. 8).

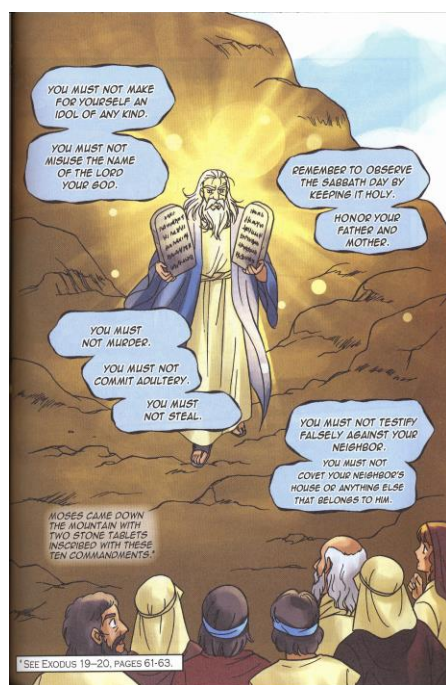


Fig. 6

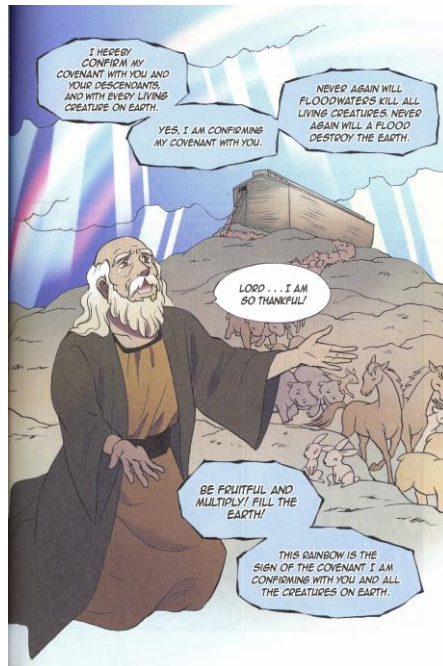


Fig. 7

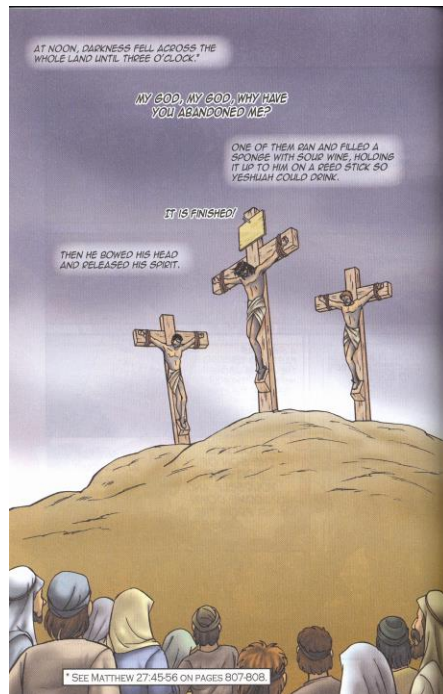


Fig. 8

Other stories illustrated in this collection involve dramatic action, and thus are depicted over the course of a number of panels. The Fall of Man unfolds in a sequence of small panels over the course of four pages, in an average of five panels per page (fig. 9). This rapid

progression of the visual representation of the plot hints at the sudden changes in the Garden of Eden, and the quickness with which humanity's fate changed due to Adam and Eve's snack choices.



Fig. 9

*Manga Bible* has no clear sociopolitical message. The selection of stories edits out problematic aspects of stories; books, like Song of Solomon, whose spiritual content is sometimes debated in a way that defies facile exegesis; and books generally ignored by Christians, like Judges, Esther, and Ruth, as well as Apocryphal books often ignored by mainline Protestants. This leads one to assume that Tyndale House Publishers wanted to create a product that was as inoffensive as possible, but featuring enough manga content to attract the interest of Christians who like graphic novels and want an atypical edition of the Bible. The edits made to the presentation of biblical stories in the text's illustrations provides a sanitized version of the Bible, which might be intended to smooth over confusing or problematic elements of the biblical narrative or aspects that do not depict biblical characters—almost exclusively male—as heroic figures, thus socializing adolescents to idealize these characters thus.

### ***Judith: Captive to Conqueror***

*Judith: Captive to Conqueror* is another manga adaptation of Scripture. Gabrielle Gniewek, a Catholic nun and author of other graphic novels about Christian topics, and Sean Lam, Singapore-based artist who has illustrated both secular and Christian texts, adapted this text from the version of Judith found in the Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition of the Bible. As manga might not be a genre with which readers are very familiar, Gniewek and Lam include helpful tips like the book “reads right to left, ‘Japanese style,’” helpfully instructing potentially befuddled readers.<sup>17</sup> Gniewek does not provide a reason for her adaptation of this Apocryphal

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<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, this reading style is the same as that used for Hebrew texts. There is some debate whether Judith was originally written in Hebrew or Greek, but this similarity with Hebrew texts is not lost on a historically minded reader, lending it an entertaining, if unintended, link to the culture out of which the text originated.

text. However, Judith's story is inspiring and feminist, which could appeal to a broad selection of readers across age and gender boundaries.

*Judith's* plot generally follows that of its Scriptural inspiration. Judith, a wealthy widow, lives in Israel, which is threatened by an Assyrian invasion. Judith develops a plan to use her beauty to infiltrate Holofernes' inner circle and dispatch him, thus saving her country from foreign occupation. The Apocryphal book and its adaptation differ at times. Judith's story is often violent, but the manga adaptation often is not. In the Apocryphal story, Judith chops off Holofernes' head; in the manga adaptation, this violence is implied but not shown in text. She raises her sword, but the next panel depicts her carrying his head in a sack. The text also contains violent content, such as the aforementioned implied beheading, as well as Holofernes slapping people in multiple scenes. The manga adaptation also has slight hints of sexuality, including a bathing scene in which we see little of Judith's body but her nudity is implied, and a scene in which Judith is almost raped by Holofernes.

*Judith* adds dialog that is missing in the source text, but it does not radically change the story. Another notable difference is that the manga adaptation names Judith's maid, christening her Zusa. It provides exposition and character development. This allows the reader to view her as a character in the story who helps move the plot along. She and Judith go to the marketplace in a scene missing from the source text. Judith is depicted as a kind woman who gives bread to the needy and to a merchant with several children, and who pays too much for produce because she wants the merchant to be able to provide for his family. Judith and Zusa's interactions indicate that their bond is a friendship, not a professional relationship. For example, Judith bristles when Zusa addresses her as "my lady." These elements of the story transform Zusa into a fundamental part of the story. She and Judith frequently interact in this adaptation of the Apocryphal text, and



their relationship is depicted more as a friendship than professional. Holofernes discusses battle strategy with his minions, also missing from the source text.

The manga adaptation takes other liberties with the text. Judith is depicted as a brunette, but Zusa is depicted with light-colored hair. We do not know her origin story, so Zusa's fair hair is unexplained but certainly odd and unexpected, given the story's ancient Near East setting. Perhaps Lam depicted Zusa thus to help readers clearly identify the two female characters, but Zusa's hair color remains a distracting element of the text. Holofernes is depicted as clean-shaven and with hair woven into dreadlocks. The former trait conflicts with examples of men in Neo-Babylonian art, who are depicted with beards. The latter does not, as these examples include men with long hair, which in stone reliefs appears to be wavy or, possibly, dreadlocked. Holofernes and other Babylonian men are depicted with similar hairstyles, whereas Jewish men in the text are depicted with long hair as well, but it flows freely. This visual difference establishes cultural differences without the author needing to devote explanatory text to the matter. Additionally, Holofernes' dreadlocks bestows upon the character an implied ethnic identity. Although his skin tone in the illustrations is not different from Judith's, he is clearly an Other. Holofernes' hairstyle also marks him as African,<sup>18</sup> which when combined with his violent and threatening actions, aligns with pervasive and pernicious stereotypes regarding African men's behavior and personalities.

Lam illustrates the text using a black and white color scheme. This aesthetic choice allows the reader to focus on the action in the panels. Lam employs varied panel sizes for various narratological reasons, which emphasizes different aspects of the text for the reader. Full-page panels draw attention to significant characters and actions. Holofernes' first mention occurs in a

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<sup>18</sup> This is similar to depictions of Samson in *The Action Bible*, which I discussed earlier in this chapter.

full-page panel, in which he looks down at an opponent (fig. 10). This establishes the important aspects of his character, primarily that he exerts considerable power and influence, and is a ruthless conqueror.



Fig. 10

Lam uses multiple panels to describe rapid action, imbuing the text with a sense of intense pacing that helps move the plot along. Over the course of four pages, averaging five panels each (fig. 11), Holofernes asks Judith to marry him. After she rejects his advances, and he attempts to rape her. The illustrations' configuration communicate to the reader that this situation escalated quickly.



Fig. 11

Lam returns to the full-page format to depict Holofernes' beheading (fig. 12). Judith looms large in the panel as Holofernes' head is on the ground. The reader shares Holofernes' perspective, and perceives Judith as powerful and menacing.



Fig. 12

*Judith*, both the Apocryphal text and its manga adaptation, are feminist texts. Their messages empower girls and women, giving them an example of a woman who managed to save her people through both cunning and violence. This text could be an example to adolescents that religious faith, intellectual cunning, and military strategy are not mutually exclusive. Judith provides an example of how women can serve their country in the same manner as men, but with slightly different skills. Judith also implicitly states that a woman's sexuality can be used to infiltrate the enemy's camp and, ultimately, liberate one's people from an foreign occupation.

### ***Messiah, Volume 1: Origin***

*Messiah, Volume 1: Origin* recounts the early life of Jesus as told in the Gospels. Written by Mark Arey, a Greek Orthodox clergyman whose translation of the Greek Gospel texts forms the basis of this graphic novel, *Messiah* provides an overview of Jesus' early life through a blending of the Gospels' stories. Arey states that the process of translating these texts "required

rigorous selection and conscientious choices” as he developed a “narrative harmony” (9). Arey’s focus is less on a pure retelling of the content of the Gospels, which often contain unique stories, but rather creating a narrative that provides the reader with an understanding of Jesus’ life. Matt Dorff, who graduated from the University of Southern California Cinema School and has had some success with adapting his scripts for television and movie projects, oversaw the graphic adaptation of Arey’s text by Kai Carpenter, whose work has been published by secular and religious publishers.

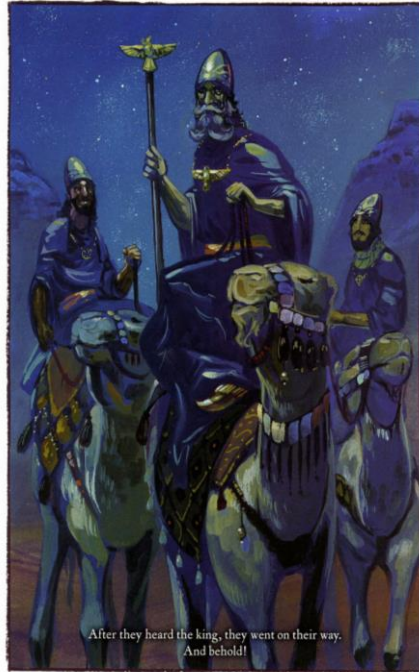
Lamenting what he views as the decades-long decline of biblical literacy, Arey states that his approach to this text is based on “ancient attempts” at creating narrative harmony “that contains the whole story of the Lord Jesus Christ in a single, continuous account,” citing an early attempt at such harmony as what influenced the establishment of the New Testament canon” (8). He also recognizes the unique impact of visual media, its current cultural presence, and the ways in which biblical scholarship benefits from—but also cannot fully be reproduced by—visual media. He writes, “We understand that we are trending with the modern consumer. *Star Wars* is a series of movies and more; *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* are books and movies series and more. Even the Bible has become a cable miniseries. But the film/video medium would be hard-pressed to tell the story using solely the words of the Bible. Only the text of Scripture can do that” (7-8).

Arey’s discussion of *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Harry Potter* reflects his understanding that not only are these texts immensely popular, but they are also attempts to communicate epic stories via visual media; the latter two examples, like the Bible, originated as written texts, a connection that the reader is quick to identify. Arey knows his audience, and he understands what media they consume. One assumes that he also understands how these media

choices affect his audience's expectations with respect to story pacing and textual fidelity. Arey is faithful to the source material. He depicts the magi, but, despite the long tradition regarding their names, omits this information. Interestingly, Carpenter depicts them according to nonbiblical tradition, including one African magus (118). In some ways, *Messiah* is similar to superhero origin stories like *Superman: Birthright* (2004), *The Man of Steel* (1986), *Batman: Year One* (1987), and *Wonder Woman: Gods and Mortals* (1987), which focus on the characters' formative years, providing explanations for the characters' morality and later adventures.

*Messiah* provides a linear narrative of Jesus' early life. If stories appear multiple times in the Gospels, Arey only gives one example. The text's narrative includes a prologue, which is an adaptation of John 1:1-18, establishing the religious context of Jesus' birth; the annunciation of the nativity of John the Baptist; the annunciation of the nativity of Jesus; Mary and Elisabeth's meeting, during which a fetal Jesus is proclaimed divine; the John's birth; Jesus' birth; the fulfillment of the law, which contextualizes Jesus' birth in a larger religious tradition; the adoration of the Magi; the Holy Family's flight to Egypt to avoid Herod's persecution; Jesus' childhood and early adolescence, including when he spoke with men in the Temple; and John the Baptist's ministry and Jesus' baptism. The text also contains pages of genealogies and an index of Bible verses, all without illustrations.

Carpenter's illustrations look like oil paintings and are in color. He uses full-page panels to depict important aspects of the narrative, including the magi traveling to (122) (fig. 13) and worshipping Jesus (125) (fig. 14). This emphasizes that Jesus' importance extends to those outside the Jewish religious tradition. However, because the magi are Gentiles, they would not share ancient Jews' sociopolitical and religious expectations for a messiah. The reader also



122  
Fig. 13



125  
Fig. 14

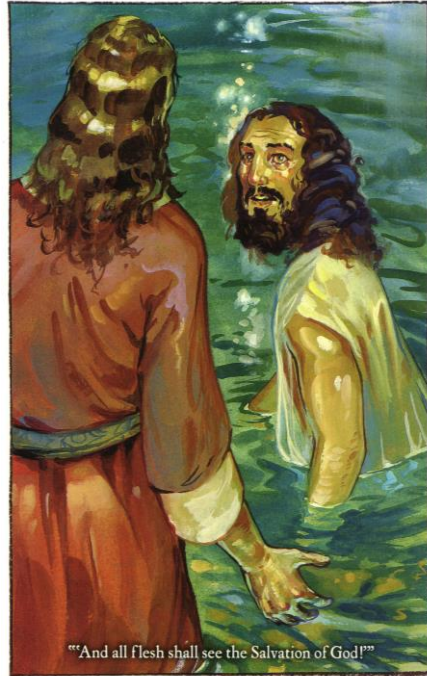
perceives that the magi experienced these events collectively. Carpenter also depicts the angel telling Joseph to go to Egypt in a full panel (130) (fig. 15). The angel's appearance is fearsome; it lurks in shadows, red eyes blazing. This illustration deviates from the traditional way in which



Fig. 15

angels are depicted. It is frightening, reflecting the dire situation in which the Holy Family found itself during Herod's persecution. A third example of how Carpenter employs full panel illustrations is Jesus' baptism (163) (fig. 16). This aspect of the story is important in Christian theology, and thus it requires an illustration that emphasizes that importance.





163  
Fig. 16

Carpenter also uses varied panel sizes to provide the reader with an understanding of the story's pace. On page 123, Carpenter depicts each magus' unique reaction to Jesus (fig. 17). These narrow, page-high panels appear next to each other. The effect is cinematic, as if the scene is composed of a series of increasingly closely framed images. From left to right, the magus' relative size in his panel increases. We see the first magus from his torso to head, and one hand; the second magus' head, chest, and shoulders are visible in the middle panel; in the outermost panel, only the third magus' head and shoulders are visible. One perceives that each magus' reactions occurs simultaneous to his peers', but we get to experience them individually. This gradual tightening of the shot emphasizes the magi's awe and his dawning realization of this baby's importance.



Fig. 17

Arey's and Carpenter's orientation toward the subject is very serious. This is further emphasized by the form and content of this text's illustrations. As mentioned earlier, Carpenter's illustrations look like oil paintings. This adds gravity to the text; it looks like a painter, not a cartoonist, created the illustration. The content in the illustrations is rendered in a very realistic manner. For example, Carpenter depicts the adolescent Jesus with acne (147). Other elements of the illustrations further imbue the text with a sense of serious scholarship. For example, the dialog and narration are typed in a serif font. Arey and Carpenter's choice to eschew a more traditionally "comic" font like Comic Sans in favor of a serif font, often used in academic texts, gives *Messiah's* illustrations a serious appearance. This more serious looking approach to the illustration reflects the content of the text as well as Arey's scholarly approach to translating and compiling the stories for this text, and that this approach does not attempt to obscure Jesus' humanity. By depicting Jesus thus, this figure, who is simultaneously divine and human, renders him more relatable to the reader.

*Messiah* does not have an overt political message. Nevertheless, its illustrations, with their classical oil painting appearances, and Arey's dedication to presenting a harmonized but biblically informed version of Jesus' early life provides the reader with a sense of the gravity of Jesus' story. Arey's approach is clear: the narrative of Jesus' life is not amusing. It is serious, traditional, and requires respect. *Messiah* is an example of how a graphic novel can be used to socialize readers into a traditional interpretation of Scripture, giving adolescents a sense of the seriousness with which they should approach their religious tradition, and the respect with which it should be treated. This artistic decision also makes the narrative of Jesus' life, and by extension Jesus himself, seem antique, so historically and culturally distant that the story, and the man himself, seem unreal and like works of fiction. Thus, this approach could undermine Arey's goal of increasing biblical literacy simply by making the Bible seem remote and outdated.

## **Didactic Texts**

### ***The Book of God***

*The Book of God* was created by individuals with a significant amount of experience with secular comics. The text was written by Ben Avery, founder of Community Comics, whose work has been published at Zondervan, Marvel, and Random House, and illustrated by Javier Saltares, whose work has been published by Marvel, DC comics, and Dark Horse. Avery states that he wants this text "to be...a starting point. A quick and accessible reference. A conversation." He also states that the intended audience includes both individuals of different religious orientations, writing, "If you believe in the Bible already, my hope is that you will learn something new about why you can trust the book your faith is built on. If you do not believe in the Bible, my hope is that this will get you thinking about what the Bible is and, perhaps, give you insight into why

people do base their worldview on what's found in the Bible's pages" (np). While clearly harboring some hope to convert nonbelievers, Avery's tone is one of self-conscious inclusivity, welcoming readers to explore the history and meaning of the Bible.

Avery notes that he is not a biblical scholar. This admission is warranted, given that *The Book of God* deals with historical and exegetical matters. *The Book of God* is highly didactic; Avery intends for the text to edify readers on both historical and religious topics, although one wonders why Avery thinks that he has the scholarly background necessary to tackle a complex subject. His objectivity as a researcher varies greatly across the text, I discuss later in this analysis. *The Book of God* is ultimately a text that describes the textual history of two religions, as well as germane cultural and historical topics, tracing the history of Judeo-Christian thought from Bronze Age Israel to contemporary American manifestations of Christianity and the Bible. In this way, it is similar to texts that explain the history of the US, such as *Cartoon History of the United States* by Larry Gonick (William Morrow 1991).

*The Book of God* is divided into eight sections, not including its index. Part one, titled "The Production of the Bible (How the Bible Was Written)," discusses the ways in which the various books of the Tanakh (Old Testament), Apocrypha, and New Testament were compiled. Avery provides an impressive yet concise overview of writing technology, discussing pictograms, ideograms, symbols, clay tablets, papyrus, parchment, and vellum, also discussing the ways in which writing and storytelling were considered art forms by various cultures, mentioning *The Odyssey*, *The Iliad*, and *Beowulf* (14-18). The inclusion of these texts is interesting, as they refer to non-Judeo-Christian mythologies but appear in a text about Christian history and theology.

After establishing the history of literature, and hinting at its ability to transmit religious ideas and tells stories about mythological figures, Avery provides a comprehensive overview of the structure of the Christian Bible. He discusses the Pentateuch, Books of History, “books of poetry,” prophets, explains the place the Apocrypha has in Christian tradition, Gospels, the Book of Acts (“only [historical book] in the New Testament”), the books of letters authored by various early Christians, and the Book of Revelation. In this section, Avery discusses apocalyptic writing, noting that Old Testament books are considered such. This helps the reader understand that the Book of Revelation in the context of a larger religious literary tradition in ancient Judaism (45). Avery does not explicitly state this connection, but it can be inferred from his writing. He also provides the history and dates of Israelites and stories in Old Testament, using conservative, traditional nomenclature (“B.C.”) for these dates.

In this section, Avery presents a history of the Bible that emphasizes historical fact, not tradition. For example, he provides theories that debunk myths regarding who authored books attributed to them, and he explains who some authors are. Avery occasionally ventures into potentially contentious territory while discussing this topic. When discussing Jude, Avery writes that the “most accepted” interpretation of Jude’s identity is that he was “the half-brother of Jesus. The second option is the most accepted” (44). The mere mention that Jesus could have siblings is fraught with potential disagreement and dissent, although it seems entirely plausible from a historical perspective that Jesus would have had siblings. Avery’s arguments also contradict other conservative interpretations of biblical authorship. For example, he writes, “Samuel probably had nothing to do with those books” (24).

In Part Two, “The Process of the Bible (How the Bible Was Selected),” Avery discusses the history of the canon and how texts were selected for inclusion in the Bible. Avery provides a

timeline of the deliberation and acceptance of the canon (54-66). These details allow the reader to better comprehend this process' history and practice. Although this content gives *The Book of God* an aspect of rigorous academic work, the reader should be mindful that Avery conceded that he is not a scholar. The reader should use caution when consuming this text as a precise, unbiased presentation of biblical history and content. Avery also provides the rules for canon, and states that "it was a logical, divinely guided process" (49-50).

In Part Three, "Preservation of the Bible (How the Bible Spread)," Avery discusses the dissemination of the canonized texts. Avery's discussion contains an impressive amount of details without overwhelming the reader with information. Avery discusses various biblical translations, including Erasmus' translation, as well as Wycliffe's, Tyndale's, and Luther's respective vernacular translations of the Bible noting these translations' historical, and persisting, influence in the Christian community. Avery also writes about historical figures who affected Church history. He discusses Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary, and Elizabeth I. Saltares only provides illustrations of Henry VIII and Mary, the only monarchs in this list who persecuted Protestants.<sup>19</sup> They are depicted as unattractive, mean-looking individuals, hinting at a pro-Protestant bias in this text.

Avery provides readers with interesting facts, such as Robert Estienne's sixteenth-century innovation to separate books of the Bible into chapters and verses, and that this numbering system is still in use (79). He also discusses the impact that various versions of the Bible have had on historical and literary figures, and that Shakespeare, John Bunyan, and John Milton used the Whittingham's Bible, also known as the Geneva Bible (78-79). Avery also explains the

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<sup>19</sup> That is, before Henry VIII's marital woes and desire for a male heir prompted him to adopt some of Anne Boleyn's Protestant ideas, allowing him to break from Rome, start the Anglican Church, and, most importantly from his perspective, divorce Catherine of Aragon.

historical facts that surround the development of the King James Version of the Bible, as well as why New World printers developed their own Algonquin translation (85). Avery does not shy away from controversy, noting that “Jerome’s Vulgate had notes saying the Apocrypha should not be considered canon” (80) and issues surrounding paraphrasing in twentieth-century Living Bible translation (87).

In part four, “The Proof of the Bible (How the Bible Has Survived and Is Trustworthy),” Avery shifts his focus from historical facts to more subjective arguments about the Bible. He writes, “The text of the Bible is surprisingly well-preserved, though—something Christians ascribe to God watching over the details of the Bible’s transmission, ensuring the texts are sufficient for his purposes” (89). He compares the Bible and the Iliad (92) and the Mahabharata (93); both times, he treats the Bible as the superior text. The perspective is not surprising in a Christian text, but it is disappointing given Avery’s scholarly orientation in previous sections of the text. He writes, “The bottom line is this: the Bible has survived in more manuscripts than any other ancient writing. And, because of that, it has survived in a better form, closer to the original than any other ancient writing” (93). The logic of this argument is flawed. By his reasoning, the Qur’an, which is notable for its relative lack of changes in its seventh-century and twenty-first century Arabic forms, would be a superior text. It seems unlikely that Avery would make this assertion, but it logically follows given the premise of his argument regarding the Bible. However, Avery concedes that the Bible contains errors. He notes that there are two kinds of errors found in biblical manuscripts: accidental mistakes and purposeful changes (90). He provides readers with an example of an error, and how it affected translation (91).

Avery writes about how texts from the biblical period were discovered, including the Oxyrhynchus (101); the oldest surviving copy of Septuagint, which was used to wrap a mummy

(102); the Dead Sea scrolls<sup>20</sup> in Israel in 1946 (104); the Codex Sinaiticus, discovered in 1975 (107). From this historical evidence, Avery extrapolates that “[t]he conclusion is that the Bible we have contains the content the original writers intended, something vitally important if the Bible is the inspired word of God. But biblical archaeology is also revealing the historical reliability of the Bible” (108). Avery provides no evidence that this argument is valid, and it is difficult to follow his reasoning unless one has already accepted that the Bible is God-inspired.

Avery makes other arguments for the truth of the Bible, to varying degrees of logical impeachability. He states that there is evidence of historical King David (110). He asserts that ancient authors, like Josephus and Tacitus, support the argument that Jesus was a historical figure. Nevertheless, Avery is intellectually honest about Josephus’ contribution to confirming the historicity of Jesus, noting that controversy exists regarding Josephus’ account of Jesus (111-113).

Troublingly, Avery, at times, is unconcerned with providing documentation for his claims or being objective in his scholarship. He provides no documentation in text or in *The Book of God’s Works Cited* for the substantial claim that there is historical evidence of the Exodus route (109). Regarding issues in the New Testament, he writes, “Those discoveries reveal that what critics believe to be errors on Luke’s part—are actually errors on the critics’ part” (115). These instances of shoddy scholarship conflict with Avery’s objective orientation toward historical scholarship and documentation in earlier parts of this text.

In the final section of narrative text, titled “Epilogue!”, Avery continues his specious reasoning. Writing about Luke again, Avery states, “If Luke was [*sic*] so careful to make the historical and geographical details of his books accurate—why would he risk losing credibility

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<sup>20</sup> The texts are not mentioned by that name.



by exaggerating or lying about the biographical details in his books?” (118) This reasoning, influenced by a twenty-first century understanding of how facts are treated in texts (which differs considerably from how first-century authors approached the topic), is based on a premise that Luke is correct regardless of his errors. The faulty reasoning does not hold up under scrutiny. Avery’s faulty reasoning is also clear in his statement that “[s]adly, considering what is at stake, both those who believe in this book and those who do not often make their decision without bothering to learn the facts” (119). The implication is that a majority of individuals who contemplate the veracity of the Bible do so without a fully understanding of the text. The irony is that the individual who makes this claim provides his reader with skewed arguments about the Bible intended to convince readers of the text’s veracity.

Avery’s worst logical error occurs at the end of the text. He writes, “But there is another proof not yet addressed. The Bible’s own ‘proof.’ Its words point you to something—someone—beyond its words. Believing in the supernatural power of the words of this book results in an encounter with God. It gets a person connected to the object of its witnesses. The Messiah, Jesus Christ.” (119). His circular reasoning does not prove to a non-Christian that the Bible is a divinely inspired text that can lead one to have a spiritual experience. This argument could persuade a reader already convinced of the Bible’s significant religious and spiritual meaning to continue interpreting the text thus, but would leave skeptical readers unconvinced. Avery’s statement provides the reader with a clear understanding of the sort of person he composes the audience for this text: people who will not argue against what he proposes to be the nature of the Bible because they already accept it. If they do not, then clearly they are not seeing this “proof.” Avery does not appear to feel compelled to provide his reader with a logical reason to accept that the Bible has supernatural aspects.

Saltares illustrated *The Book of God* in color. This color scheme gives the text a sense of verisimilitude; the text’s fictitious narrator is as concrete as the history he presents. Avery and Saltares use full-page panels to emphasize important content in *The Book of God*. On page 4, Avery discusses how the “Bible has shaped world history and governments and laws.” This page contains busts of Ronald Reagan, Abraham Lincoln, Isaac Newton, and Galileo, and dialog bubbles for each historical figure that contains quotations about the importance of the Bible (fig. 18). These images are superimposed over an image of the Earth. This implies that the Bible is of global importance, not simply to Western culture.



Fig. 18

Avery and Saltares use varied panel size and arrangement to emphasize important concepts and relationships between topics. A full-page panel introduces each section of the book.<sup>21</sup> In it, the section’s title looks like it is chiseled in stone. The text’s narrator, a man of

<sup>21</sup> The last three sections of this text are the Works Cited and Recommended Reading, Timeline of the History of the Bible, and Index. These are not introduced by a full-page panel and the narrator.

apparent African ancestry with dark skin and dreadlocks,<sup>22</sup> discusses some issues that will be presented in the section as an introduction to that section’s general topic (fig. 19). Panel size and



Fig. 19

placement also determines the pace with which the text provides information. For example, multiple short, wide panels discuss the proliferation of twentieth-century Bible translations, giving the reader a sense of the rapid development of and volume of texts in this field. Likewise, panel size can show the scope of other aspects of the Bible. When discussing the Bible’s composite books, the narrator has books on a shelf. For the Apocrypha, two pages show the book titles over a series of four panels (33-36). This gives the reader a sense of the Apocrypha’s size, which is particularly useful for readers of specific religious backgrounds—such as Protestants—who might be unfamiliar with this collection of texts.

<sup>22</sup> This is the third instance of a character in a graphic novel in this survey having dreadlocks and apparent African ancestry. There does not seem to be a unifying theme behind these depictions, but their presence in American graphic novels is thought provoking, given Western Christianity’s history of rendering biblical characters with European features.

Saltares also uses panels to demonstrate the relative importance of historical figures and Christian history. Shakespeare, Bunyan, and Milton each appear in narrow panels (79) (fig. 20). The authors do not appear in chronological order according to birth or death year; their arrangement is unexplained. Despite this curious presentation of information, the portraits' placement in the text demonstrates that these authors are of the same historical and cultural importance. Saltares includes an image under each author's portrait, apparently intended to represent that individual's most important or famous text. Shakespeare has Hamlet with skull, Bunyan has knight with dragon, and Milton has a silhouette of Adam and Eve with a bright red apple.

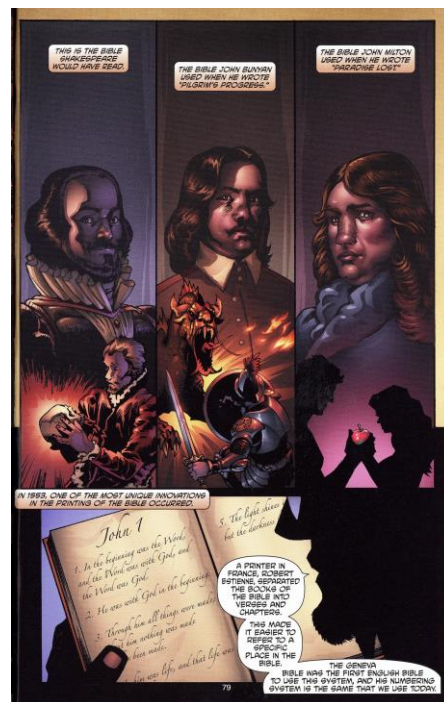


Fig. 20

*The Book of God* has no clear political perspective. However, its illustrations imply an orientation that consciously deviates from traditional Western Christian art. For example, Jesus has dark skin, and appears to have African ancestry (116). He is not the only one depicted thus; the prophet Micah also has similar features (31). This is a deviation from traditional Eurocentric

depictions of biblical characters, and it is refreshingly inclusive. Even characters who exist outside of biblical texts, such as English monarchs and the text's narrator, look "darker" than one would expect. The text's narrator also appears to be of African ancestry. These depictions seem to be deliberate choices by the text's creators and a conscious attempt to create a text that deviates from the mainstream and traditional, predominately white depictions of biblical characters and Christians in American culture. This interpretation is further supported by the fact that Avery is white.

Avery's occasional objectivity and fairness with respect to the historicity and timeline of Old Testament texts<sup>23</sup> is also surprising and indicates an occasional deviation from a more traditional conservative interpretation of biblical history and authorship. Regarding the Book of Job, Avery states, "But the ancient setting and wording suggests the source of the book is older than that" (25). He also writes, "Jewish tradition says that Moses himself was the author of all five books of the Torah.<sup>24</sup> .... Some scholars, however, believe the Torah was compiled later on by 'priestly editors'" (20-21). Conceding that the Bible contains texts that show cultural contact in the ancient Near East, and that Moses did not write the Torah, does not undermine the idea that this is a God-inspired text. Nevertheless, discussing the lack of eyewitnesses for biblical events and the older source of Job can be construed as promoting the idea that the Bible is not written by the individuals to whom it is attributed, which would be controversial for conservative Christians. Despite its flaws, *The Book of God* provides readers, especially adolescents who might not know much about the history of the Bible and Christianity, with a somewhat liberal,

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<sup>23</sup> Notably, this objectivity does not extend to Luke, discussed earlier in this section.

<sup>24</sup> This is an interesting word choice, as earlier in the book these writings are referred to as the Pentateuch. The use of the Hebrew world for these texts could signal an attempt to make the text seem more ancient and distant from European influences, although "Pentateuch" was first used by Hellenic Jews.

very historically oriented introduction to these topics. The text has a serious tone, yet avoids dry, overly academic language, making it appealing to a large audience.

### ***101 Questions About the Bible and Christianity, Volume 1***

*101 Questions About the Bible and Christianity, Volume 1* was written by Art Ayris, chief executive officer of Kingstone Media Group,<sup>25</sup> and illustrated by Mario Gully, who created *Ant* and has illustrated texts for Marvel. The text's artwork is similar to contemporary graphic novels, and inked in color. Ayris does not provide a reason for creating this text. Nevertheless, it is an exegetical text and provides a compendium of analyses of a number of topics from the perspective of a literal interpretation of the Bible. Regardless of this *raison d'être*, *101 Questions About the Bible and Christianity, Volume 1* does not feature the objective presentation of information, nor does this appear to be Ayris' goal; instead, he embraces the strict expectations that biblical literalism encourages, even when this approach produces assertions and conclusions that conflict with historical and scientific facts. This text's cover depicts a collage of seemingly disparate images, including a roaring Tyrannosaurus rex in front of stoic humans, a planet engulfed in flames, and a trio of space ships; this cover promises the reader more compelling and entertaining content than the text contains.

*101 Questions About the Bible and Christianity, Volume 1* addresses nine specific topics. These include biblically informed discussions regarding Cain's wife's origin, dinosaurs, Jesus' activities during the three days between his crucifixion and resurrection, what occurs after one's death, the existence of aliens and unidentified flying objects, angels, demons and the occult,

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<sup>25</sup> Ayris is the CEO of Kingstone Media Group, but there is no indication that *101 Questions About the Bible and Christianity, Volume 1* is a self-published text.

whether animals go to heaven, and which events signal the end of the world and how the world will end. Ayris provides biblical references for his claims. He does not address each question one might have about the Bible, but this is only Volume 1 in the series. One assumes that subsequent volumes will interrogate other questions Christians might have on various religious, cultural, and scientific topics.

Ayris' text often emphasizes the need to interpret the Bible literally. While discussing various predictions regarding Jesus' return to Earth, the structure and placement of the panels provides insight into the worldview that Ayris seems to want to impart to his reader. On one page, five panels discuss various apocalyptic prophecies (fig. 21). Two panels, approximately half-page high, discuss the Mayan calendar and anxieties during the year 999. Three narrow panels below discuss different aspects of this topic. On the left, the panel discusses twentieth and twenty-first century predictions. The other two panels on the bottom of the page discuss Matthew 24:36, a verse that states only God the Father knows when the end of the world will occur.



Fig. 21

Panels about predictions take up more space on the page than two panels that discuss how to interpret the Bible. This structure gives the reader an impression that these predictions occurred frequently, and that they often preoccupy people more than literal biblical interpretation. Nevertheless, the arrangement of the panels is a bit confusing. It makes little rhetorical, or visual, sense that one panel about false predictions would appear aligned with panels discussing how to properly interpret the Bible. It seems as if Gully ran out of space, not that this was an intentional to demonstrate their thematic similarities.

Gully uses full-page panels twice, and they appear on sequential pages. One panel depicts heaven, a futuristic, clean city with plenty of greenery but no humans. The other panel depicts hell, a dark place with haggard, isolated individuals (fig. 22). This emphasis on a soul's destination makes sense in a text dedicated to biblical exegesis. The absence of humans in the panel about heaven is fascinating because it implies that gaining entrance to eternal paradise is a difficult task few souls achieve. This provides visual emphasis for the evangelical argument regarding the necessity of following biblical tenets closely and to being a "good" Christian.

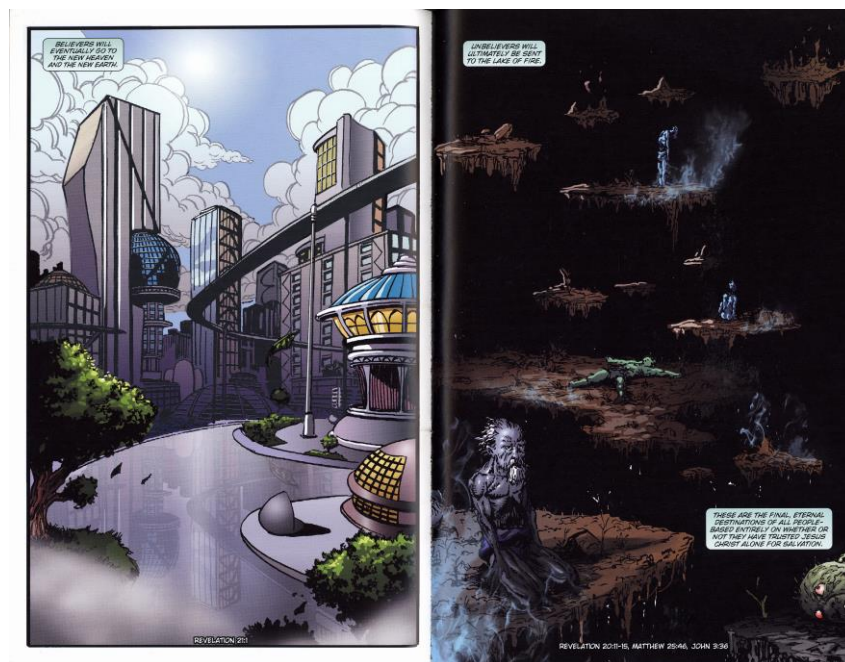


Fig. 22  
122



Like other artists discussed in this chapter, Gully at times uses multiple panels to emphasize important elements of the text’s narrative. In a section about demons and the occult, Gully uses three panels on a page (fig. 23). Two panels occur at the top of the page. Each is approximately half the height and width of the page. A demon appears in the panel on the left, and a scene with individuals engaged in a séance with spirit rising from table appears on the right. Below these panels, a woman, who appears to be a hippie with long blonde hair and wearing a lot of jewelry and is “not a child of God,” asks “great spirit of the universe” to “dwell in [her] and teach [her].” The implication is that the hippie is beseeching demons to possess her. The three panels are roughly the same size, and the panel in which the hippie apparently requests demonic possession appears below panels depicting demons and spirits. This placement and panel sequence in this section implies that the hippie’s request is the outcome of contact with demonic forces.



Fig. 23

Later in the section, a page with three page-width panels discusses the dangers of the occult and the way one can protect oneself (fig. 24). A panel containing a Ouija board appears at the top of this page; the middle panel discusses the “hierarchical [misspelled in text] structure of demons,” and portrays fearsome demons; the bottom panel provides strategies to spiritually battle these demonic forces. These panels are of equal size, implying that Ouija boards and demons are legitimate threats, and that they require equal consideration and weight in this discussion. Likewise, the panel discussing spiritual warfare against demons is of equal importance. This size is a strange narrative choice; one would think that the importance of spiritual warfare and battling demons would warrant larger visual space.



Fig. 24

The Antichrist makes multiple appearances in *101 Questions*, and panel composition again provides insight into the text’s meaning and political orientation. The section about the end of the world discusses the Antichrist’s “peace agreement with Israel” that will last for seven years, based on a literal interpretation of the Book of Revelation. In a panel, two men and a

woman sit before what appears to be the United Nations logo. One man's face is obscured, implying his identity and true nature are unknown; it is likely that he is intended to represent the Antichrist. The other man is blond, appears to be of European descent, and has a tag on his shirt that states "Israel."<sup>26</sup> The woman sits between the men, and smiles at the Antichrist. This depiction of international diplomacy dovetails with the conservative evangelical interpretation of the connection between the Antichrist and the United Nations.

The text contains a popular cultural reference, and it coincides with a particularly confusing argument about epistemology, aliens, and the Antichrist. ET, the adorable alien creature from the eponymous 1982 film, appears in the first frame of a section that discusses whether aliens exist. ET resides in what appears to be a rip in space, peering out from a hole in a panel that also contains a background of stars and space and three space ships. One of these ships looks a great deal like a Millennium Falcon. Later in this section, the text claims that demons can tempt humans and "for this reason it is entirely plausible that 'aliens' could be part of an end times deception of mankind," noting in one panel that "Bible says that people will not believe the truth" and in the next "but they will believe a lie." The former panel contains a picture of the Bible, and the latter a nefarious looking professor in front of a dry erase board with 'ape man' written on it. This argument is difficult to follow, and the connection between UFOs and believing that evolution is scientifically valid is left unexplained. Ayris seems to expect his reader to accept his reasoning without question, rendering additional evidence and argumentation unnecessary.

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<sup>26</sup> The depiction of Israel as a blond man is problematic. While blond Jews exist, "Israel" looks like he has Northern European ancestry. This depiction reflects the white American evangelical impulse to identify with Israel, even to the point of drawing a representative of the nation to look like them. (This is also in keeping with the long tradition of rendering biblical figures as Europeans.) In turn, this depiction implicitly reflects the conservative evangelical impulse to support Israel and consider itself connected to Israel, especially with respect to geopolitical events, even if such support is sometimes undergirded by an interest in manifesting the End Times.

Ayris' and Gully's work in the text does not explicitly espouse a political orientation, but it is a very politically and socially conservative text. Ayris ignores science in favor of conforming to a conservative biblical interpretation. Likewise, Ayris and Gully also eschew accepted scientific fact when discussing dinosaurs. The text attempts to use biblical passages to demonstrate that humans and dinosaurs coexisted; panels show both humans and dinosaurs together. This text contains messages that are anti-evolution, against nonliteral interpretation of scripture, contain negative depictions of Mormons, and paranoid—but not uncommon among very conservative evangelicals—implications about the United Nations. This text is an attempt to indoctrinate readers into a very conservative and literal interpretation of the Bible and its application to twenty-first century America.

### ***Luther: Echoes of the Hammer***

*Luther: Echoes of the Hammer*, written by Susan K. Leigh, the author of several Christian-themed children's books, and illustrated by Dave Hill, whose professional work also includes the video game industry, provides readers with an overview of Martin Luther's life. This text contains information about how his wife, Katharina von Bora, "ran the farm, raised cattle and sheep, and ran a brewery," providing the family with enough income to allow Luther to focus on his theological work (110). Leigh and Hill depict the founder of Lutheranism with surprisingly honesty, even discussing his depression and health problems (113).

Leigh does not clearly state why she created this text, but her word choice and the publishing house provide readers with insight into these matters. *Luther: Echoes of the Hammer* is published by Concordia Publishing House, a company affiliated with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, "[f]ounded in 1869 to preserve the German Lutheran heritage in America"

(“About”). Additionally, Leigh refers to Luther as a “hero” multiple times in the text, claiming that “he never wavered from the truth” (134). Thus, it is apparent that this text is intended to be didactic with respect to Luther’s life. The reader should be aware, though, that the presentation of Luther’s life in this text might be sanitized in an attempt to portray him as a paragon of faith without any potentially problematic aspects of his personal history, such as speculation that he was mentally ill, that might challenge readers’ understanding of Luther as a historical and religious figure. The text’s portrayal of Luther’s life and impact on history is edited in other ways. Subsequent results of Luther’s rebellion against the Catholic Church, specifically the founding of the Lutheran denomination, are not discussed in the text. To an extent, this mitigates the didacticism of the text by restricting its focus so narrowly.

The text lacks an overt political message, but its theme is that one should always fight for that in which he or she believes, despite various authority figures’ responses and attempts at suppression. This message would be very appealing to adolescents chafing under the yoke of various parental and institutional forces. This text is obviously intended to convince Lutherans of the piety of their denomination’s eponym. The text could be an attempt to build a sense of community pride in being a Lutheran by detailing the positive aspects of Luther’s work and personality, and ignoring some other aspects that might raise questions about his sanity, such as Luther’s belief that Satan was tormenting him. At times, Leigh paraphrases Scripture, but uses the English Standard Version<sup>27</sup> of the Bible as the basis of this work. *Luther*, in many ways, is similar to secular graphic novels that present overviews of famous historical figures’ lives and accomplishments.

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<sup>27</sup> This translation is also published by Concordia Publishing House.

Hill's illustrations highlight important aspects of Luther's life, reinforcing the text's messages. Hill judiciously employs color to emphasize important aspects of Luther's story. Hill uses color in illustrations in panels depicting Luther's baptism (fig. 25); young Luther's study of the Bible (fig. 26); Luther's experience during a storm, which led to him becoming a monk (fig. 27); Luther's contemplation of the grace-giving qualities of relics, which was a step toward the formulation of his opinions regarding Catholic Church dogma (fig. 28); Luther's iconic posting of the 95 Theses to the church door, arguably one of the most important events in Protestant history (fig. 29); his destruction of a papal bull (fig. 31, which I will discuss in more detail later); and his death (fig. 30). The use of color makes these illustrations seem more important than those rendered in black and white, thus instructing the reader through visual means to pay closer attention to these specific panels.

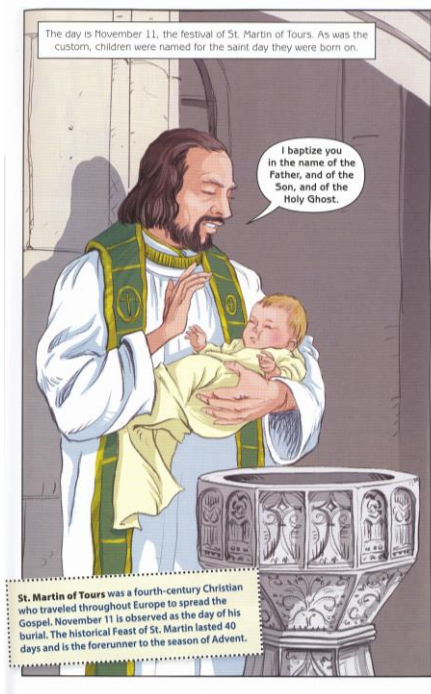


Fig. 25



Fig. 26



Fig. 27

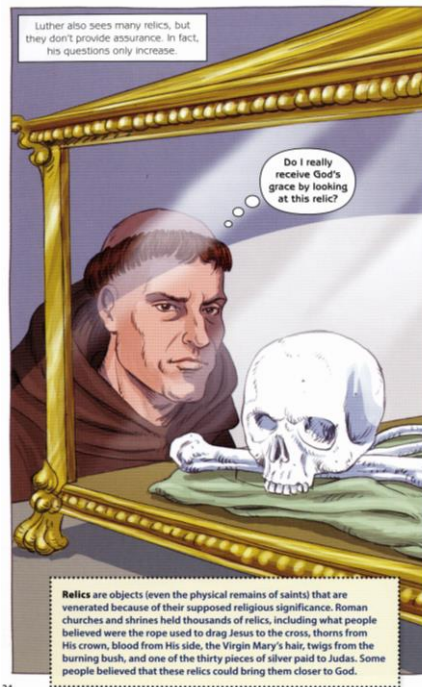


Fig. 28

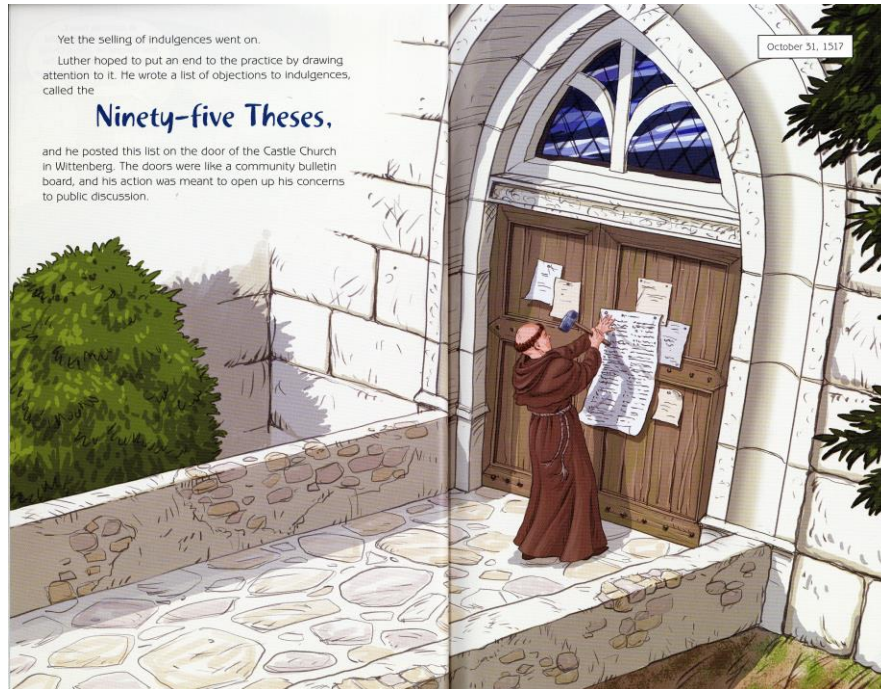


Fig. 29



Fig. 30

Although Leigh calls Luther a hero in this text, not every illustration portrays him in a flattering manner. In one illustration, Luther throws a papal bull and a book of church laws into the fire, an act signaling his rebellion against the Catholic Church (64-65) (fig. 31). Standing behind a wall of flames, Luther's angry expression renders him nearly demonic in appearance.





Fig. 31

This is a fascinating, and somewhat perplexing, depiction, given the esteem Luther enjoys among Lutherans, who arguably comprise the audience for this text. When considered in context of the stories regarding Luther's supposed interactions with Satan, this demonic appearance is confusing, and it seems as if Luther is doing Satan's bidding by disrespecting the Pope. This interpretation undermines the very religious and moral foundation of Lutheranism specifically and Protestantism more broadly. It is very unlikely that Hill intended this message, given *Luther: Echoes of the Hammer's* Lutheran orientation and distribution by a Lutheran publishing company. Nevertheless, these images have the potential to inspire readers, even those sympathetic to Protestantism, to view Luther in a less favorable light, further complicating the legacy of a controversial historical figure. Leigh's and Hill's choices, respectively to include this story and depict it in color, indicate the importance this event has in Luther's legacy.

Hill employs a number of differently sized panels to illustrate this text. Some illustrations of particular importance span multiple pages, including the two-page color illustration of Luther

nailing the 95 Theses (34-35). The “Who’s That Again?” infographic (two pages, 38-39), which discusses Luther’s “allies” and “adversaries,” also spans two pages of full-page illustrations, but only pictures of individuals referenced later in text are in color, and page citation is given so the reader can learn more. Thus, Hill again uses color to highlight important information to the reader. The timeline at end of book also spans multiple pages, illustrated with black and white illustrations. This section contains Lutheran history and select events in secular world history, including the years when Montezuma died and “Michelango” [sic] created *David*. This helps the reader contextualize Luther’s work in larger world history, giving the reader an understanding of the various historical events that might have shaped Luther’s followers’ worldviews or simply historical events that are merely of potential interest to a twenty-first century reader. Leigh and Hill do not provide an explanation for why they chose to include the events on the timeline.

*Luther* serves other pedagogical functions. At times, Leigh defines words like “purgatory” and “heretic.” These definitions provide insight into Leigh’s assumptions about *Luther*’s audience’s age and level of education that guided the text’s development and structure, and it is clear that Leigh intends to reach a young audience. “Purgatory” is not a word found in Lutheran doctrine, and therefore one with which readers might be unfamiliar and require a definition. Leigh’s assumption is that these readers would also be unfamiliar with Catholic teachings. The inclusion of “heretic,” too, indicates Leigh’s assumptions about her readers. While “heretic” is not jargon, it is one with which younger readers might be unfamiliar. *Luther: Echoes of the Hammer* functions as a good introductory text for evangelical Lutherans, as well as other Protestants, allowing them to better understand the origins of Protestantism and Lutheranism specifically. Interestingly, the text has covert feminist themes, which conflict with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’s often socially and politically conservative orientation.

Leigh does dedicate substantial attention to Katharina von Bora's economic support of the family, but notes her contributions. Leigh also does not discuss von Bora's contributions to the success of Luther's religious movement, but the ways in which her work outside of the domestic sphere enabled Luther to focus on his religious movement are implied. Thus, *Luther: Echoes of the Hammer* might in some ways introduce adolescent readers to a form of feminism. Like the feminism found in *Becoming Beka* and *Chaos*, discussed in chapter 1, this is self-determination with a caveat. Women are allowed to be assertive and participate in the public sphere only as long as they ultimately defer to men.

### ***Radical Jesus***

*Radical Jesus* presents the history of more “radical” manifestations of Christianity, starting in Europe and extending into the Americas. This text features work by a number of authors and artists.<sup>28</sup> Paul Buhle, emeritus faculty and Senior Lecturer in the American Studies department at Brown University, edits this collection, featuring text and art by a number of contributors. Divided into three sections—“Radical Gospel,” “Radical History,” and “Radical Resistance”—this collection highlights aspects of Christian history and theology that have a more progressive sociopolitical orientation, and seems intended for an audience with similar sociopolitical beliefs. *Radical Jesus* is a highly didactic text, but unlike others in this section, its sociopolitical orientation is overtly progressive and has an international focus.

Buhle provides a history of art interpretations of Bible, offering readers context for this text in the large tradition of Christian art and media (6). He is sanguine about the text's potential to function in a didactic manner and inspire readers regarding the positive sociopolitical

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<sup>28</sup> For simplicity's sake, I will discuss these contributors with their respective sections.

contributions Christians can make in the world, writing, “We believe that what you see in this book offers new insights, new sources of inspiration, and even new hope for a better future” (6). *Radical Jesus* contains an overwhelming amount of information that spans centuries of history across numerous continents. *Radical Jesus* fits into a larger history of graphic novels that discuss progressive sociopolitical movements and religious leaders, such as *March* by John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, Nate Powell and *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story* by the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

Sabrina Jones, a Quaker author and illustrator who has created other social justice-oriented comics, wrote and illustrated the first section, “Radical Gospel.” Jones’ approach deviates from many texts that focus on the Gospels, discussing only Jesus’ life from his baptism to his death. Jones blends the biblical narrative with contemporary images, imagining Jesus in modern-day situations. For example, Jesus states, “I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.” In these panels, Jones illustrates Jesus receiving twenty-first century clothing, lying in a twenty-first hospital bed, and standing behind the bars of a modern prison (38). These modern-day images are interspersed in “Radical Gospel”; this makes it appear as if Jesus and his teachings transcend temporal and spatial boundaries, and that his message and ministry are equally applicable to life in first-century Judea and twenty-first century America.

Jones’ artistic style has a kinetic sense to it (fig. 32). Simultaneously simple yet visually striking, and characterized by its black and white style, thick lines, and few lines between panels, the scenes in this section seem to bleed together. This aspect of the section’s art dovetails with the content that blurs Jesus’ temporal and spatial setting, giving the reader a sense that the content of the Gospels transcends time and space, rendering Jesus’ teachings and life story

universal. This entire section is a biblical reference, yet Jones provides no book or verse citations. This provides readers with a sense of stories in the Gospels blurring together to create one narrative. This blurring is also accomplished by the integration of Jesus in modern day settings interspersed with images of him in first-century Judea.



11  
Fig. 32

The second section, “Radical History,” contains a wealth of information regarding several aspects of Christian history. It recounts nine distinct periods of Christian history, spanning five centuries and two continents. A number of individuals created the text of these nine sections, but Gary Dumm, author of a number of graphic novels about political topics, and his wife and frequent collaborator Laura Dumm, a painter, provide the illustrations for every section. The Dumms’ artwork is sepia-toned, and the individuals depicted look realistic. These illustrations not lighthearted, amusing “cartoons,” and reflect the serious content of this section.

The first five sections are set in Europe. The first section, about “The Lollards: The Scriptures Speak a New Language,” is set in fourteenth-century England, and discusses early

experiments in translating the Bible.<sup>29</sup> The second section, “The Radical Reformation,”<sup>30</sup> begins with Martin Luther’s historic nailing of 95 Theses on the door of a Wittenberg, Germany, church. However, it does not focus solely on Luther, and traces the development of Protestantism in Germany and Switzerland during the sixteenth century.

The third section, “Escape from Galley Slavery: A Story of the Hutterite Brethern,”<sup>31</sup> focuses on the persecution of Anabaptists in sixteenth-century Austria and Slovenia. This section marks a departure in the narrative, shifting focus from general Christianity more to specific Protestant movements. In this section, Buhle notes that “Anabaptists were often dubbed ‘the radicals,’ an epithet they came to embrace” (63), and that some oppressed Anabaptists escaped from slavery with help of fellow Christians (68-69). This section helps highlight early Protestant social justice activism, which *Radical Jesus* later expands on throughout the rest of the text. The next two sections recount stories of individuals showing kindness to others, even at the risk of sacrificing one’s freedom or overlooking crimes. “The Story of Dirk Willems”<sup>32</sup> recounts the story of Willems, a sixteenth-century Swiss man who came to the aid of the man pursuing him. This good deed resulted in Willems’ death, despite the fact that Willems’ pursuer argued for his release from the death sentence. In “The Mystery of the Thatch,”<sup>33</sup> set in eighteenth-century Switzerland, a homeowner catches thieves stealing thatch from his roof. Rather than alerting the authorities, the homeowner invites them to share a meal. Later, the thieves replace the thatch

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<sup>29</sup> Artwork by the Dumms and story by Paul Buhle

<sup>30</sup> Story by Paul Buhle, Amy Gingerich, Byron Rempel-Burkholder, and Gary Dumm

<sup>31</sup> Story by Paul Buhle

<sup>32</sup> Story by Gary Dumm

<sup>33</sup> Story by Paul Buhle

they stole. These stories emphasize kindness, even when confronted by individuals or situations in which one's safety or possessions are compromised.

The final four sections of “Radical History” are set in North America, and recount stories in which kindness, forgiveness, and social justice feature prominently. In “Jacob Decides,”<sup>34</sup> Indians<sup>35</sup> abduct Jacob and his sons from their eighteenth-century colonial America home. Jacob escapes, but his sons remained with the Indians. Christian “was adopted in full Indian fellowship” (76), but later returned to his family. Joseph returned to his family as well, but he continued to socialize with Indians. “The Society of Friends: John Woolman’s Story”<sup>37</sup> provides an account of abolitionist work in Pennsylvania, hinting at the Quakers’ long history of progressive social justice work. The story of the Quakers continues in the next section, “Quakers and Indians,”<sup>37</sup> also set in Pennsylvania. It recounts Background William Penn’s “‘holy experiment’ in peacemaking, based on trust and respect” with Native Americans (79). The author discusses subsequent tension after European immigrant expansion, despite Penn’s efforts, and laments “if the Quaker peace policies had been adopted, the U.S. would have become a much different country”—even sports team names would be different (85). The history of abolitionism and Quakers is revisited later in “Angelina Grimke, Christian Abolitionist,” the last story in “Radical History.”<sup>38</sup> Grimke, a Jesus convert, pamphleteer, and possible inspiration for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, worked to disseminate information about the cruelty of slavery. In many ways, Grimke’s story is a capstone for this section of *Radical Jesus*, providing the culmination of four

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<sup>34</sup> Story by Paul Buhle

<sup>35</sup> *Radical Jesus* uses the term “Indian.” To avoid confusion, I used only “Indian” when referring to peoples indigenous to North America.

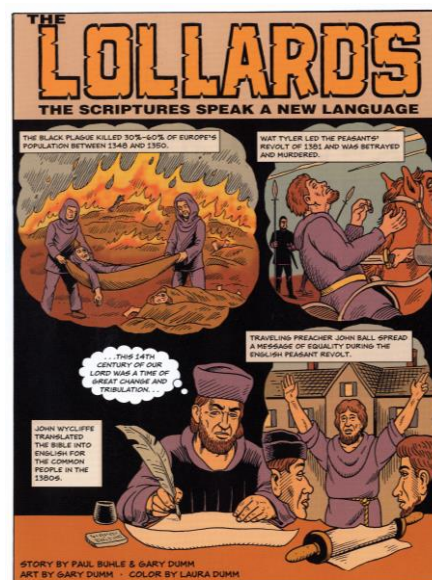
<sup>37</sup> Story by Paul Buhle

<sup>37</sup> Story by David Wagner

<sup>38</sup> Story by David Wagner

centuries of progressive Christian thought. Each vignette in this section demonstrates another advancement in the ways in which Christians view themselves in the world, as well as the positive work one can do in secular society, ultimately leading to the abolitionist movement in the United States.

“Radical History” is drawn in a manner similar to a generic American comic, but its sepia-toned illustrations seem to be printed on aged, slow-burning paper that hints at its age (fig. 33). This allows the reader to perceive the text as a historical document; it does not contain the temporal and spatial blending found in “Radical Gospel.” These traits provide “Radical History” with a sense of “this happened long ago in history,” appropriate for section about history of Christianity from fourteenth-century Europe to nineteenth-century North America.



46  
Fig. 33

A section titled “Radical Resistance,” comprised of six subsections narrated by different individuals, concludes *Radical Jesus*. Nick Thorkelson writes and illustrates different vignettes of modern-day progressive Christians working to improve the world. Thorkelson illustrates these sections in a manner similar to comic strips one might find in a newspaper, and are published in



color (fig. 34). They are not intended to look realistic. These sections include, “There Am I Among Them: Faith-Based Movements in Modern Times,” which provides an overview of



88  
Fig. 34

progressive Christians’ work historically to improve the plight of the oppressed. In “Steal Away: Abolitionism & Black Freedom,” Thorkelson’s narrator in this section, an African American woman, recounts Sojourner Truth’s life story, and the role Christian faith played in Truth’s advocacy for women’s and African Americans’ rights. Thorkelson continues to explore the connections between progressive Christianity in America and Civil Rights in “Extremists for Love: The Civil Rights Movement,” moving the conversation into the twentieth century. Thorkelson returns to themes of feminism and political dissent in “Swords into Plowshares: Serving the Poor by Resisting War.” His female narrator states that she was “full of rage that the church, for its patriarchy, for its hypocrisy,” feelings that led to her want to “serve Jesus by serving the poor” with likeminded people (105-106). Thorkelson continues to discuss how progressive Christians work to help the disadvantaged in “He Has Lifted up the Lowly: Accompanying the Poor & Organizing Community.” In this section, Father Joe, a Catholic

priest, discusses his time in Latin America from the 1960s through the 1980s. He faces the threat of violence in Chile under the Pinochet regime and witnesses high childhood mortality in Bolivia. Eventually, Father Joe returns to the United States, helping people in Boston safeguard their homes from predatory lenders and helping people access healthcare.<sup>39</sup>

Thorkelson also discusses how everyday people can make a geopolitical difference in “Getting in the Way: Peacemaker Teams & Conscientious Objectors.” This vignette recounts the story of Ben, whose parents were involved in the “Christian Peacemaker Teams” (CPT), and his fear with respect to his parents’ work in “Colombia or Haiti or somewhere” (120). His mother was in Iraq when assault on Baghdad began, and through this vignette, the reader learns about the history of the CPT, as well as places where CPT have operated, including African Great Lakes Region, the US/Mexico border, Iraqi Kurdistan, Colombia, the Aboriginal Lands in North America, and the West Bank. This text is overtly pro-Palestinian, discussing the “occupied West Bank” and the “illegal policy” that led to conflict (124). *Radical Jesus*’ overall theme of faith and words being stronger than swords is clearest in this chapter when Thorkelson writes, “CPT’s presence made the soldiers’ guns useless” (124).

*Radical Jesus* contains a number of biblical references. Jones bases “Radical Gospel” biblical references, but provides no citations. “Radical History” contains a reference to the Book of Mark on page 54. “Radical Resistance” contains the highest number of attributed Bible verses at six, and all from the New Testament.<sup>40</sup> *Radical Jesus*’ focus on the New Testament is not surprising, and neither is its politically progressive content. On page 6, Buhle explains why Jesus was “radical,” juxtaposing conservative paranoia and Jesus’ teachings. Buhle writes, “Jesus goes

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<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, “Romneycare” is mentioned in the chapter, contextualizing it politically and adding verisimilitude.

<sup>40</sup> Matthew 25:35 (105), John 20:19-20 (109), Luke 9:6 (119), Luke 9:41-44 (120), James 2:15-17 (127)

to the roots of assorted hatreds—not only our destructive exploitation of humanity but also our plundering of creation. All of life is endangered and we cannot afford these hatreds running rampant much longer” (6). The many authors of this book privilege forgiveness and working for peace over selfish endeavors. Jones depicts Jesus holding a newspaper with “investment fraud” headline with the text “don’t store up treasures on earth, where moth and rust devour and thieves break in” with a picture of Jesus (27).

*Radical Jesus*’ progressive politics are evident elsewhere in the text. Buhle writes, “To those many Christians who have sacrificed their lives, across two millennia, for the causes of peace and justice” (np). *Radical Jesus* is not simply a compilation of various stories of Christians working for social justice across centuries and throughout the world. Rather, Buhle and the other contributors to this text clearly intend *Radical Jesus* to contextualize these stories into larger Christian history, helping the reader understand that progressive politics and social justice work are fundamental parts of Christian dogma and tradition.

Thorkelson’s section, “Radical Resistance,” features the most compelling but potentially controversial political material. He compares twentieth-century and twenty-first century African American religious leaders’ rhetoric with Jesus’ teachings. He compares Martin Luther King’s and Jesus’ rhetoric, which is relatively uncontroversial (102). Undoubtedly to the dismay of some readers, Thorkelson also discusses Jeremiah Wright, who was infamously demonized by American political conservatives during the 2008 Presidential Election. Thorkelson writes, “The Reverend Jeremiah Wright (a prophetic voice much maligned in the mainstream media but cherished by the thousands of black churches allied against mass incarceration)” (104), and discusses Wright’s comparisons of the prophet Jeremiah and early Christians Paul and Silas in terms of “threat[s] to homeland security” and men who “disrupted the illegal economy” (104).

This rhetoric is perhaps shocking for some readers; others readers might consider it to be an enlightening, inspiring a new outlook on Christian history.

Notably, Thorkelson refers to Jesus as “Palestinian” (104). This adjective would certainly offend some more conservative readers, if any were not alienated already by the text’s overt progressive politics. By describing Jesus thus, Thorkelson prompts readers to consider the ways in which Western Christians and Western Christian art have represented Jesus’ identity. It also compels the reader to consider the ways in which the mere word “Palestinian” carries sociopolitical weight and might prompt negative visceral reactions in some American Christians’ minds, and how this should be interpreted in light of Jesus’ teachings regarding treating others with kindness and respect.

*Radical Jesus*’s final panel summarizes the text’s entire message. On the last page, different people speak. The last speaker, a white woman with fair skin and light brown hair, says, “But we can prepare for it, by making the world more peaceful, more fair, more just” (127).

*Radical Jesus* is a good introduction to progressive Christianity, tracing it back to the fourteenth century. It is an antidote to the plethora of conservative Christian messages that suffocate any dialog in mainstream Christian media about alternative ways to interpret the Bible in a manner that promotes peace and social justice. This text could provide adolescents (or adults who are new to Christianity) with an understanding that Christianity is not monolithic; it is as diverse as the global population of Christians.

## **Fiction**

### ***Hand of the Morningstar, Volume 1: Advent***

*Hand of the Morningstar, Volume 1: Advent* is a superhero graphic novel, illustrated in black and white, with Christian themes. *Hand of the Morningstar* is written by Brett Burner, the founder of Christian publishing company Lamp Post Publications and Mike Miller, who has worked on comic books “ranging from Superman to Wolverine” and founded Christian publisher Abacus Comics. Miller’s professional history creating superhero comics is clear in *Hand of the Morningstar*’s visual design. *The Hand of the Morningstar* more generally is a reference to secular comics like the Fantastic Four, which contain teams of superheroes who actively work to improve the world. Burner and Miller do not provide a reason for creating this text, but it is apparent that Burner and Miller saw the opportunity and market for a Christian superhero team that could appeal to an audience that is already familiar with the genre.

This graphic novel tells the story of a team of superheroes called the Hand of the Morningstar, “a team, hand-picked to protect the world from itself” and pronounce that “the Lord does not fail.” Artemis controls Hand of the Morningstar, providing them with directions; in turn, the Morningstar controls Artemis. The Morningstar, whose presence in the text is verbal but not corporeal, provides the superhero team with their powers. Artemis instructs them that they “should be elevating the Morningstar at these opportunities. It is by the Morningstar that you have your unique abilities.” Artemis also frames the Morningstar’s essence and work as religious and benevolent. Artemis states, “But we must always wrap those deeds in the love of the master. Let these people know that it is only the Morningstar who saves them from their circumstances. He is their savior. Not you.” In a scene later in the text, Titan prays to the Morningstar for help;

the Morningstar, whose words are on a white background and surrounded with smoke-like swirls, states, “I hear your prayer.”

The five members of this superhero team are introduced in full-page illustrations. This team is comprised of four muscular men, including Titan (fig. 35); Avatar, who looks like superhero version of Jesus and makes his first appearance in the graphic novel with his arms outstretched parallel in a pose reminiscent of Jesus’ crucifixion (fig. 36); Shango (fig. 37); and Kami (fig. 38). These male characters conform to typical superhero body types. Kwan Yin, the only woman in the Hand of the Morningstar, is also muscular, but not masculine. Her clothes accent her body’s curves, but do not display cleavage. Interestingly, despite her Chinese name, Kwan Yin has blonde hair (fig. 39). Notably, the members of the Hand of the Morningstar, as well as their handler,<sup>41</sup> have names taken from religions outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition, but their respective origins are not discussed in the text.



Fig. 35

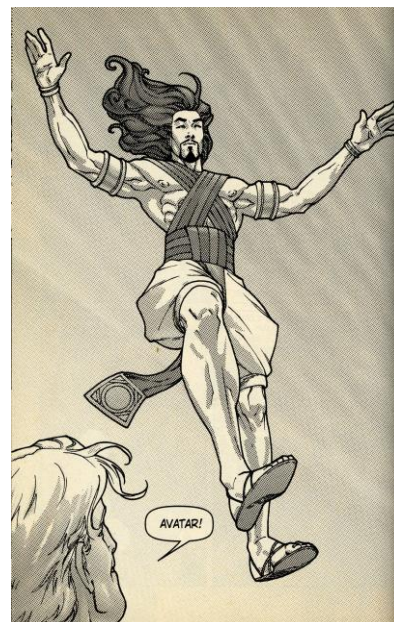


Fig. 36

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<sup>41</sup> *The Hand of the Morningstar's* Artemis' gender does not correspond with that of his mythological eponym. The text provides no explanation for this change.

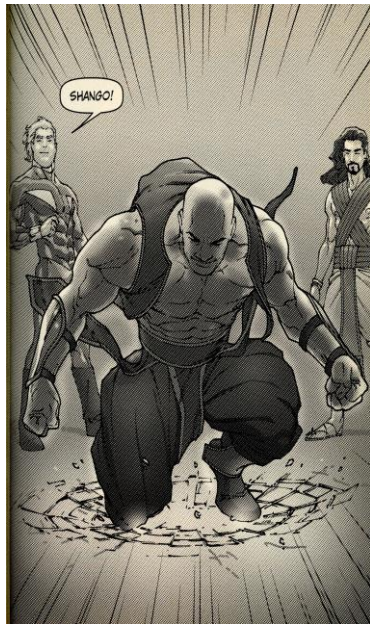


Fig. 37



Fig. 38



Fig. 39

The text's plot contains mild, not very graphic violence when the Hand of the Morningstar members fight antagonists. Interestingly, Kwan Yin never engages in fisticuffs; she

is absent from battle scenes, without explanation.<sup>42</sup> The text's panels help emphasize the action of the sequences. Fight scenes feature multiple thin and/or narrow panels to demonstrate speed of conflict. Some scenes from battles with enemies, like when Titan electrocutes an opponent and when Shango attacks an opponent, are presented in full-page panels. During one conflict, Tempest, an antagonist, calls Titan a "religious nut." Despite this dialog, religion itself is largely absent from this text, and no characters are depicted as worshipping a deity, although they gain their powers from an unseen, apparently supernatural, and seemingly benevolent, being.

Artemis' final scene in the graphic novel reveals that the Morningstar might not be a benevolent being (fig. 40). Depicted over the course of a few pages, which draws out the action and makes it more dramatic. The text's use of panel size variation adds to the scene's dramatic elements and draws attention to various aspects of the scene. On the first page, in four equally sized panels, the viewer witnesses discrete parts of Artemis' ritual preparation. Artemis enters the room, he takes off his suit jacket, and puts on robe with illegible symbols on it. The equally sized panels indicate that each step of this process is equally important to the ritual, but the purpose of the ritual is unclear. On the next page, three small panels about a third of a page high expand the narrative. They depict Artemis praying, and the other two highlight aspects of his face. The increased attention on Artemis' eyes and nose in one panel and nose and lips in the subsequent panel indicate that this step of the ritual only involves Artemis communicating with and perceiving the Morningstar. The absence of his ears in these panels indicates that the communication, at this point, only occurs in one direction. These panels appear superimposed on top of a full-page panel of Artemis speaking with the Morningstar, and receiving a response from

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<sup>42</sup> If one wanted to pry deeply for meaning in the text, she could argue that this is an argument against women in the military. However, it seems unlikely that Burner and Miller inserted that much meaning and subtlety into this text.



him. This signals a shift in the ritual’s purpose and meaning. Artemis’ dialog is on a white background, and Morningstar’s is on black background enclosed in smoke-like swirls. This dialog box has a different appearance than when Titan and the Morningstar interact, indicating that the Hand of the Morningstar is unaware that their eponym is a malevolent force. Readers who are aware that “Morningstar” (Isaiah 14:12) and “Lucifer” are names for the same character in the Bible can easily predict this plot twist. It is difficult to surmise whether this is a spoiler, poor narrative choice, or a way to try to make Christian readers feel smart because they can predict the plot’s twist. The dramatic irony adds tension to the text; the Hand of the Morningstar members are unaware of their benefactor’s true nature, and thus adds tension to the story.

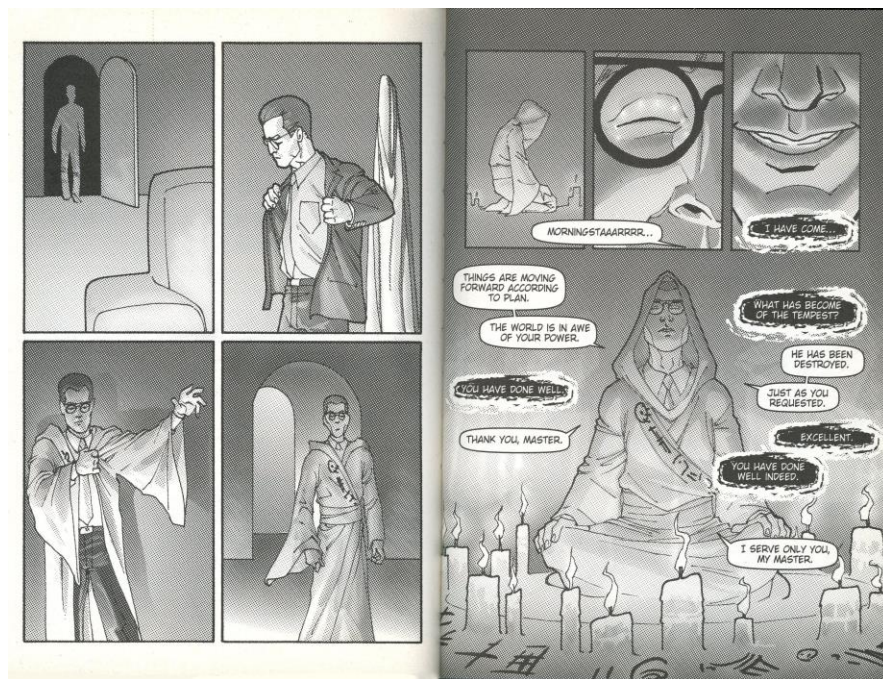


Fig. 40

This text contains few secular references. While Titan channel surfs in a few panels, the reader sees dialog from the television set. The names used in these dialog boxes—“Chandler,” “Jerry”—implies that Titan is watching *Friends* and *Seinfeld*, respectively. These allusions to secular media inform the reader that Burner is aware that his reader would have a passing

knowledge of 1990s American sitcoms, and that these sitcoms would contain material that would not, generally speaking, be morally objectionable to most Christian readers. Additionally, *The Hand of the Morningstar*'s similarities with secular superhero comics implies that Christians would be familiar with these texts, and would be amenable to reading about Christian versions of them. The text contains light sexuality. Kwan Yin's dress, with its side slits, while inoffensive and rather modest by most superheroine standards, is could be considered scandalous by conservative standards. After he dispatches a villain and saving the day, Titan receives a reporter's "digits," indicating that he dates members of the opposite sex. These secular references and (minor) treatments of sexuality and romance indicate Burner's comfort with depicting such topics, and Zondervan publishing them tacitly states that these are acceptable material for an evangelical audience. This is a further blurring of the line between living in the world and being of the world, against which evangelical culture often argues.

*The Hand of the Morningstar* contains little sociopolitical content. Burner and Miller do not give the members of the Hand of the Morningstar and their nemeses clear political affiliations, religious affiliations, or ethnic identities. This text contains few biblical references, but no scriptural references are given for the "Morningstar." However, the names of the members of the Hand of the Morningstar, as mentioned earlier, refer to religious traditions outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition. One could interpret that the Hand of the Morningstar's members and Artemis' connection to the Morningstar indicates some prejudice against religious traditions outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and implies that any being outside of this tradition is uninformed or following Satan. I did not analyze subsequent volumes in this series, and cannot attest to whether later texts in the series clarify this matter. The effect that *Hand of the Morningstar* might have on adolescents is unclear. Some adolescents might have an

understanding of world religions, and pick up on these themes, at least unconsciously. Others might not, but they might associate these deities' names with a fictional graphic novel, rather than religious traditions worthy of respect. It should be emphasized that the members of the Hand of the Morningstar are not, at least in Volume 1 of the series, deities. Regardless, the fictionalization of religious figures, or simply using their names for fictitious characters, is fraught with issues. This act confers upon the fictitious characters a sense of gravitas, if only by associating them with a larger religious tradition. Likewise, it strips namesake religious figures of the solemn respect one might afford such an entity, and makes them seem the products of fabulists. This perspective on non-Christian deities is not uncommon in the Christian community, but it is a problematic perspective to encourage among adolescents who live in a pluralist society.

## **2048**

*The Hand of the Morningstar: Volume 1* is apolitical, but *2048* places conservative sociopolitical issues at the center of its narrative, embracing controversy and encouraging readers to contemplate life in a dystopian America. Written by Marvin Olasky, Distinguished Chair in Journalism and Public Policy at Patrick Henry College and author of a number of conservative evangelical texts, and illustrated by Brian Williamson and Clint Cearley, *2048* depicts an America in the not-so-distant future in which biotechnological advances have led to “bumans,” human-ape hybrids, being a part of society. *2048*'s plot focuses on Bonnie, an intelligent buman, and her struggle to be accepted by American society. The text also contains subplots regarding fictional American political figures attempting to normalize various types of sexuality. Williamson and Cearley's decision to illustrate the graphic novel using tonally dark color

illustrations gives insight into the plot's themes; the colors' darkness visually reflects and reinforces themes in Olasky's dark dystopian story.

Bumans can communicate with humans, but various human characters question bumans' social standing and personhood. Some individuals, like Senator Josh Logan, eventually argue for human rights, likening their struggle to the Civil Rights Movement and other instances of discrimination in American history. Logan is not the only politician in the story; Viveca Sprawl, "pornographess supreme," a scantily clad blonde, attempts to influence the American electorate to promote her version of "equal rights." She states to a reporter, "Whatever Americans want to do in their own offices and bedrooms is up to them! I'm for income and sexual equality!"

Sexuality provides a significant part of this text's plot, and it's treated graphically (for a Christian text) and with an anti-sex perspective, all while objectifying select female characters. Three depictions of female characters in *2048* provide good examples of this strange anti-sex sexuality. The first example occurs during the text's first pages. The first scene of *2048* features an obese man in a car with a female buman. He is "a lonely man with certain taste in women." He cajoles her, "Aw come on! You're a buman! I want the same thing *you* want." The implication is that bumans are fetishized by human men, and that casual sex—even among humans and human-ape hybrids—is normal in this text's universe, indicating that this is an alternate universe in which few people moral standards with which readers would identify.

In the second example, the reader sees female sexuality run amok. The panels' composition provide further insight into the text's meaning. In one passage, Viveca is "turned on" after giving political speech. A man offers to give Viveca "real reality" to help her deal with this physical state. Instead, she opts for virtual reality. This scene features angled panels, and the dialog between Viveca and the man occurs in in small panels, which are placed over a full-page

image of Viveca in virtual reality machine. This gives the reader the impression that Viveca interprets interaction with a human male as an inconvenient disruption as she pursues sexual pleasure on her own.

In another scene, Viveca appears with a human “sex slave.” The message is that, in this version of America, women assert their sexual autonomy, and eschew even casual sex with men in favor of self-stimulation or sex with animals (or animal-human hybrids).<sup>43</sup> This is the sort of sexuality that Viveca is attempting to use her political clout to normalize, and it is a message that Olasky wants the reader to find repugnant. Olasky and Williamson objectify Viveca elsewhere in the text, including panels in which Viveca’s derriere and breasts are featured prominently. Viveca flaunts her body and sexuality. She is unapologetic about her desires, and her sexuality cannot be restrained. Viveca fits into a larger tradition of the fallen women who is sexually assertive and domineering, especially to men.

The last example is less sexually explicit. Bonnie, the main human character, wears a low cut, short blue dress that prominently displays her breasts and ample body hair. This objectification is strange because Bonnie is the moral center of this text, not the representation of inappropriate sexuality. Later in the plot, Bonnie converts to Christianity and adopted by the Logan family. At the climax of the book, Bonnie is killed, transforming into a martyr for the human rights movement. In the last panel of the book, it is implied that Bonnie went to heaven. This content is contrary to some conservative interpretations of biblical teachings, which state that animals do not have souls; perhaps it is Olasky’s attempt to assert that any human-animal hybrid animals are inherently human, a concept that he does not explicitly interrogate in the text.

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<sup>43</sup> Bonnie is granted some form of human personhood by the end of the text, making this scene in retrospect not an instance of bestiality.

2048, published in color, looks like an average American comic. Full-page illustrations highlight the text's themes. Viveca Sprawl's physical appearance and posture implies that Americans in the mid-twenty-first century are permissive with respect to female sexuality and risqué clothing (fig. 41). Depictions of a "giga church" exterior, which looks like a sports stadium with a church steeple in the background, and a theatrical sermon tacitly predict that church will be considered a form of entertainment in the future (fig. 42). Panels depicting a sleepless Senator Logan ponders whether bumans have souls (fig. 43) and an uncomfortably crowded human camp (fig. 44) force the reader to contemplate human rights.



Fig. 41

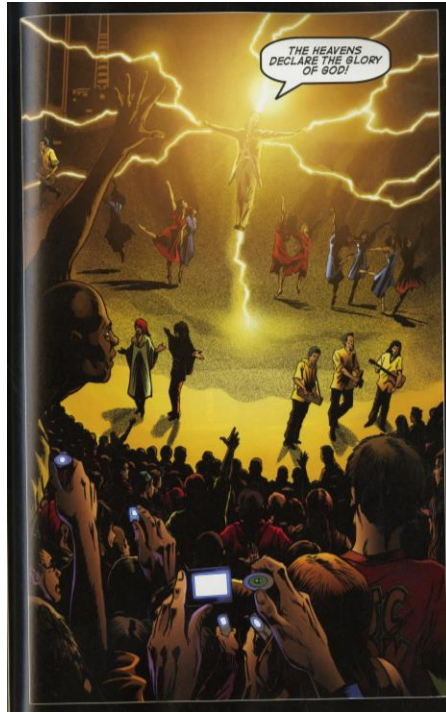
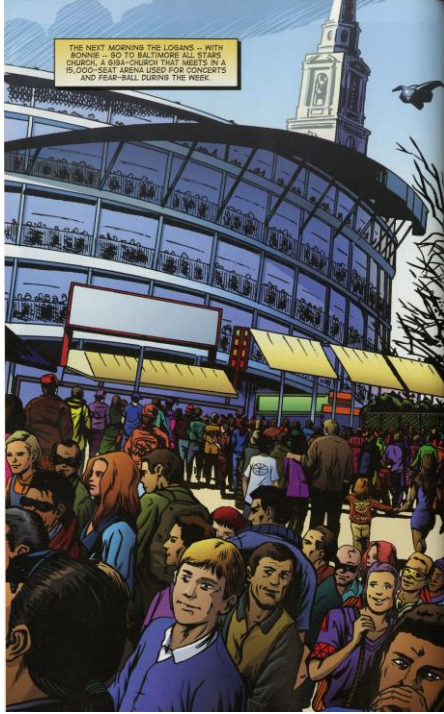


Fig. 42



Fig. 43

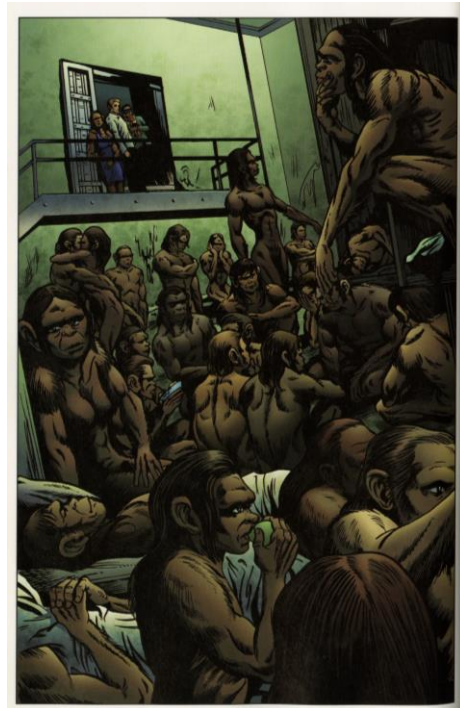


Fig. 44

Each of these full-page illustrations highlights something relevant about this text's universe.

2048 compares with dystopian comics, like *American Flagg!*, but is also part of a larger science

fiction tradition that interrogates issues around biotechnology, which includes *Frankenstein*. *2048*'s focus on human rights is reminiscent of early issues of *X-Men*, in which Stan Lee and Jack Kirby provided social commentary on the Civil Rights Movement (Jackson, "Re: comics chapter").

Olasky does not explicitly state why he created *2048*, but this text's political message is clear: American should not allow the loosening of moral standards. Early in the text, Senator Logan says, "Colleges teach that pornography is good for people" (38). This statement, coupled with depictions of Viveca's sexuality, transform *2048* into a warning about dangers of sexuality in American culture. It is also a text that interrogates the need to respect human (or hybrid human) lives, and the attendant need to prevent sexual exploitation. This latter message is certainly not toxic or misguided, and it dovetails with contemporary American concerns regarding sex trafficking. However, Brian Williamson and Clint Cearley's sexually suggestive illustrations of female characters obscure and undermine Olasky's overall anti-sex message. Williamson and Cearley seem to want to appeal to their readers' prurient interests, but these images conflict with the text's narrative that promotes chastity. This attempt at moral superiority, rendered hypocritical by depictions lewd acts and clothing, undermines the reader's ability—and desire—to receive moral instruction from the text's creators.

*2048* appears to be an attempt to convince readers that biotechnology should not be something one considers lightly, and that humanity is linked to one's DNA (if one is even part human, she is therefore accorded the same moral and spiritual standing as "fully human" individuals). This message itself is not politically conservative, but it coexists with a conservative anti-sex message, thus imbuing the former message with the latter's conservative meaning and social implications. Thus, this text is a primer of sorts for adolescents. By



introducing the idea of humanity, and implicitly linking it to the value of one's personhood and being a spiritual being, and emphasizing that no humans should be sexually exploited, Olasky primes his readers to make judgments regarding the morality of sexuality that occurs outside of, or deviates from, a strictly conservative framework.

## **Conclusion**

This survey of ten Christian graphic novels provides insight into the multitude of approaches Christian authors and artists employ while disseminating Christian ideas in this medium. Comics is flexible category, allowing it to defy attempts to construct streamlined generic definitions. So, too, are Christian comics prone to this difficulty. Much like Christianity itself, Christian comics is not a monolithic entity. This generic flexibility also benefits both comics generally and Christians specifically. By allowing comics to further expand its generic boundaries and audience expectations for content and form, Christian comics encourages the genre to continue developing in novel ways. This flexibility also allows Christian authors and artists to create texts that meet their audiences' needs, and facilitates the creation of texts that mirror American Christianity's diverse nature. These texts, especially in the case of *Radical Jesus*, encourage readers to explore sociopolitical aspects of their religious tradition that are usually ignored or overshadowed by the more rhetoric of American Christianity's strident conservative contingent.

Like evangelical young adult literature, Christian comics provide adolescents with an entry point into aspects of Christianity. Like literature, comics provide readers with a highly individualized path to explore Christian themes, shaped by authors' sociopolitical and religious beliefs. Some texts, like *Radical Jesus*, *101 Questions about the Bible and Christianity*, and *2048*

have clear political messages. Other texts, such as *Radical Jesus*, *Judith: Captive to Conqueror*, and *Luther: Echoes of the Hammer*, give readers a sense of how religious faith can encourage one to engage in heroic or subversive actions, normalizing behavior that might otherwise be interpreted as troublesome, disruptive, disrespectful, or otherwise discouraged. These texts can be vehicles to indoctrinate adolescents into ways of interpreting Christianity, ushering them into specific lifestyles or theological orientations that could shape their worldviews into adulthood. Thus, Christian comics have a great potential to be didactic, shaping young Christian minds and socializing them into specific strains of American Christianity.

Nevertheless, one should refrain from assuming that an adolescent who reads a text will be indoctrinated and socialized into that text's philosophical orientation. Not every adolescent will read Judith's or Martin Luther's stories and feel compelled to challenge authority figures, to engage in civil disobedience like the individuals depicted in *Radical Jesus*, or to demonize promiscuity and female sexuality like *2048* encourages. These texts simply provide readers with Christian-themed stories of a variety of sociopolitical orientations. Whether adolescents adopt these views will result in a plethora of factors, including the milieu in which they read the texts, their existing sociopolitical beliefs, and a number of other factors which are difficult to predict. Consumption of a text does not necessarily lead to a shift in one's beliefs or actions, but texts can inspire readers to explore the world in ways which were previously inconceivable.

## Chapter 3

### Shooting for Jesus: Issues in Evangelical Christian Video Games

Christians have a long history of quickly adopting new technologies and forms of communication and entertainment and using them to spread religious messages. Johannes Gutenberg used his revolutionary printing press to mass-produce the Bible. Amy Semple McPherson broadcast her sermons on the radio. Pat Robertson broadcast his sermons on television and founded the Christian Broadcasting Network, entirely devoted to religious programming. This continues into the age of new media, in which Christian web designers create websites that catalog and maintain information for denominations, individual evangelical churches, and numerous translations of the Bible. Video games, another form of new media, have a decades-long history in American culture, and they have millions of dedicated fans. It is unsurprising that evangelicals would also adopt video games as a medium through which they can disseminate their theological interpretations and speak with fellow believers. These video games, like the Christian young adult literature and comics discussed in earlier chapters, straddle the occasionally blurry line between recreation and religious practice.

Developing an adequate definition for “video game,” a category of entertainment with a multitude of permutations, presents some difficulties. Although it is primarily a visual medium, video games require users to engage with the text using other senses, most notably hearing and touch. The definition I employ in this chapter expands on the definition that scholar Grant Tavinor provides in his book *The Art of Videogames*. A text “is a videogame if and only if it is an artifact in a visual digital medium, is intended as an object of entertainment, and is intended to provide such entertainment through the employment of either rule and objective gameplay or interactive fiction” (32-33). This definition is useful because it is conveniently somewhat vague,

but it does not exclude essential aspects or examples of the medium; the definition can thus apply to an array of video games, but is clear enough to articulate definitive aspects of the medium. The interactive nature of video games is of particular importance in this survey because of the implications for how, or even if, users can use video games with Christian themes as part of a religious practice. This survey includes single-player and multi-player games, as well as those that can be played online or with a personal computer (PC).

Video games, in general, are very popular in contemporary American culture. According to a Pew survey conducted in 2015, 91% of teenage boys and 70% of teenage girls have access to a game console; additionally, 84% of teenage boys and 59% of teenage girls play video games online or on their cell phones (Lenhart, “Teens, Social Media & Technology Overview 2015”). The Pew survey does not specifically discuss the content of these video games, and firm statistics regarding adolescent consumption of video games with Christian themes are unavailable. Additionally, the Pew survey also does not include information regarding these adolescents’ religious affiliations. Nevertheless, it is clear that video games, as a general category of media and entertainment, are a significant part of most American adolescents’ lives, and one can safely assume that evangelical adolescents are among those who consume this entertainment. Because video games are played so frequently, it is worthwhile to consider how video games with Christian themes compare with their secular counterparts, the impact that video games with religious themes can have on their adolescent players, and the implications that this medium might have for evangelical Christianity in the twenty-first century. Video games are ubiquitous; also, they can function in stealthily didactic ways, providing players with messages regarding how individuals how they should treat individuals outside of their religious community, how

they should interpret Scripture or interpretations of prophetic texts, or what constitutes religious engagement and worship.

Questions regarding how these games function as texts, worship aides, and entertainment guide my inquiry into evangelical video games. Prominent among these are whether these games contain clear Christian themes, how they represent non-Christian individuals in gameplay, and how these games' design compares to secular games released during the same period. This chapter does not contain a comprehensive analysis of specific evangelical video games compared with their apparent secular (approximate) equivalents, as such an in-depth study would warrant more study than can be accommodated in this dissertation. Nevertheless, a broad investigation of secular games, their forms, conventions, influence on evangelical video game production provides the basis for interpreting the latter.

Video games are a popular form of entertainment, perhaps because of the ways in which they allow individuals to participate in deeply rooted behaviors. Media critic and video game scholar Liel Leibovitz states that individuals play video games “because games, while purely digital, conjure the ancient rhythms of our species,” and provide players with an opportunity to experience “glory” in competition (29). Video games appeal to players on a number of levels, allowing them to explore new worlds and assert their will in those worlds, behavior that certainly appeals to adolescents (as well as adults). Uses and gratification theory also helps us understand the appeal video games have for players. This theory, which explores how individuals consume and receive gratification from media, originated in the 1940s. Although it is unclear which scholar first developed this theory, Herta Herzog's 1944 study of individuals' consumption of radio soap operas is an early application of it (Wimmer and Dominick 351). Subsequent scholars have examined how individuals engage with various types of media. In “Uses and Gratifications

Theory in the 21st Century,” multimedia journalism scholar Thomas E. Ruggiero discusses the integration of interactivity and hypertextuality into the theory. Ruggiero is not the first scholar to use uses and gratification theory to discuss video game usage, but his essay helps move the theory into the twenty-first century and provides an overview of the theory and its history.

The theory emerged in the 1940s as a reaction to media in that decade, but its fundamental argument—that individuals consume and receive gratification from media, and this gratification can vary among individuals—remains unchanged despite the numerous aesthetic and technological changes that have shaped media since that decade. This theory attempts to describe why and how individuals seek out media, and which purposes these media serve for their users. Each individual might seek out a different form of media for a variety of purposes, ranging from entertainment to education. This theory explains why an individual would play a video game, but it can also be extended to explain why evangelicals would create video games. They understand the appeal that video games have to a significant number of potential players, and they understand that their particular theological and philosophical reasons for creating content make their product uniquely appealing to particular audiences whose entertainment and religious needs are not being met by other products. Cognitive scientist John L. Sherry notes that the pursuit and consumption of media is a “dynamic, message-specific process of locating and maintaining goodness-of-fit between an individual’s needs and repetitive media content (e.g., genre conventions)” (107).

Like other entertainment options, video games provide their audience members with the opportunity to temporarily flee from one’s normal life and responsibilities. Harry J. Brown, who teaches game studies at DePauw University, notes that “[p]art of the escapist appeal of videogames, perhaps, is their utopian evocation of a world in which our ethical choices are

always clear and never muddled, as they are in life, by confusion and guilt” (96). Video games with religious content are no different than their secular equivalents with respect to this aspect of their gameplay and meaning. Indeed, Christian games that allow players to kill characters in the game not only provide a digital world in which this behavior is acceptable, the fact that this gameplay occurs in a religious game implies a sort of divine approval, or at least sanctioning, of behavior that is prohibited by religious laws.

I chose the five video games that I discuss in this chapter from a list of 57 games released between 2000 and 2015. I did not randomly choose these games; I selected them based on their similarities, with respect to content, gameplay, and game design, to secular games published during the same period. I employed this approach to ensure a better analysis of the ways in which evangelical video games are similar to, and perhaps borrow from, the design conventions of coeval secular video games. Two video game players, who have extensive experience with secular video games and personal experience with evangelical Christianity, assisted me with this chapter’s research.

## **Game Analyses**

### ***Left Behind: Tribulation Force and Left Behind: Rise of the Antichrist***

I discuss the *Left Behind* games in this survey, *Left Behind: Tribulation Force* (2007) and *Left Behind: Rise of the Antichrist* (2010), together for a simple reason: they are essentially the same game, and both games are inspired by the eponymous series of novels that dramatize the premillennial dispensationalist interpretation of biblical prophecies. The game design, game play, and even the games’ manuals are nearly identical. Both games were released on CD-ROMs and compatible with Microsoft Windows, a widely used operating system, which indicates that

the game designers understood the potential market for these games and wanted to maximize the size of the potential audience. Both games are rated “T” by the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), indicating that the games’ content is appropriate for a teenage, or older, audience. The *Left Behind* games are set in New York City after the Rapture has occurred, and millions of Christians have disappeared from the planet. The *Left Behind* games, like their literary and cinematic counterparts, feature a world in which good forces battle evil in the name of God.

The gameplay is not difficult. One can play each *Left Behind* game in single player or multiplayer mode. One can choose to play a tutorial, a skirmish, or a storyline in one of two options—featuring platonic friends Bruce and Rayford or married couple Buck and Chloe. These characters appear in the *Left Behind* source text and films, but the characters in the video game are not voiced by the actors who portray them in the film adaptation of the *Left Behind* novels. Staying faithful to the games’ literary source, the plot is propelled by the idea that the Tribulation Force has realized that the Antichrist has perpetrated a “terrible deception” on humanity, and the Tribulation Force must combat evil in the world (28).

The types of characters in the *Left Behind* games are broadly categorized as the Tribulation Force, or good/Christian; the Global Community Peacekeepers, or evil and/or in league with the Antichrist; and Neutrals, who haven’t allied with anyone yet (25). The Tribulation Force’s and Global Community Peacekeepers’ characters and assets are further divided into “recruiter,” “builder,” “healer,” “soldier,” and vehicles, and each category has one to four levels of entities of varying degrees of specialization and abilities. Although the Tribulation Force and Global Community Peacekeepers each contain characters from these categories, they also have characters from unique categories. The Tribulation Force has “influencers,” such as “musician,” “praiser,” “worship leader,” and “prayer warrior,” categorized in level of increasing



ability. The Global Community Peacekeepers have a somewhat similar category of character called “musicians,” categorized in level of increasing ability as “musician,” “band member/recording artist,” “rock star,” and “pop star.” The Global Community Peacekeepers have two categories of characters that the Tribulation Force does not: “pretenders,” further divided according to level into “pretender,” “activist,” and “cult leader”; and “criminals,” further divided as “thief,” “thug,” and “gang boss.”

The player interacts with each type of character, regardless of the character’s affiliation with the Tribulation Force or Global Community Peacekeepers. The games’ manuals instruct players to “[s]ave as many people from the clutches of the antichrist as possible” and inform them that “[y]our purpose is absolutely NOT to wipe out the enemy forces! Remember, those are PEOPLE he has deceived and can be recruited” (28).<sup>44</sup> In both games, the object of the game is to convert unbelievers to one’s side. While one can kill non-player characters (NPC), the preferred way in which a player in the *Left Behind* games eliminates enemies is through religious conversion, not physical death. This differs from the way secular games treat NPCs. Converting NPCs to another state is an uncommon aspect of secular games. In most secular games, the common practice is to kill NPCs, if one interacts with them at all. The manual informs players that “[t]here are all sorts of people in Tribulation Forces—and every single one of them is a valuable resource for you. Each person is an individual—with a name, and a background making them unique—there are no faceless masses here” (25). Each character in the game, regardless of good, evil, or neutral affiliation, has a name and a biography that the player can access by clicking on the character. This is a remarkable amount of detail to include in a video game, and it indicates that the game designers want the player to consider each character as a unique

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<sup>44</sup> This text is formatted according to that found in the games’ manuals.

individual, and the biographical details humanize the characters, perhaps inspiring the player to think of the digital human as someone who would deserve eternal life. The game designers might intend for this to translate to an impulse to “save” individuals outside of gameplay, an activity that individuals who consume *Left Behind* texts might already be inclined to do.

There are also practical in-game reasons not to kill NPCs. When the NPC is killed, it disappears; when it is converted, it remains in the game and can be repurposed as part of the player’s in-game army. The conversion process is multistep. To convert an NPC from evil to neutral, the player must select the NPC and have a musician unit interact with (convert) it. An additional, similar step is required to convert the NPC from neutral to good. Post-conversion, the unit is not automatically available to the player in the game. The player must select the NPC for use and incorporate into the list of in-game troops.

Like many video games, the *Left Behind* games contain soundtracks. The games’ soundtracks are of particular note, and they present some interesting issues with respect to how evangelicals are willing to overlook religious differences to create text designed to entertain individuals in their community. The games also give the player the option to choose which song he or she would like to hear while playing. The games’ boxes include text stating that Chance Thomas, a composer who has contributed to secular video games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Lord of the Rings* and *King Kong*, created music for the *Left Behind* games. It seems likely that the marketing team highlighted Thomas’ involvement in this public way because his professional reputation could entice individuals to play the game. This indicates that individuals responsible for marketing *Left Behind* products have faith (some) conservative evangelicals’ interest in these texts will override their distrust of anything related to the often maligned and feared *Dungeons and Dragons*. Thomas’ involvement with the *Left Behind* games is surprising

for additional reasons. Thomas is a member of the Church of Latter-day Saints (“Hi I’m Chance Thomas”). This religious affiliation might be objectionable to more hardline evangelicals. Thomas’ involvement is also intriguing simply because the *Left Behind* novels on which these games are based contain content that promotes conservative interpretations of evangelical Christianity as the only acceptable form of religious faith; the presence of a Mormon might cause some *Left Behind* fans discomfort. Nevertheless, Thomas’ involvement suggests that commercial considerations were assigned more importance than employees’ demonstrable strict adherence to conservative evangelical doctrine.

For the players who enjoy the in-game music and are untroubled by Thomas’ religious beliefs, the game provides an option to purchase the in-game soundtrack. This commercial aspect of the games indicates that the game developers were aware that players might enjoy the in-game music and want to purchase it and listen to it while not playing the game itself. It also indicates an understanding of their market, and that directly marketing games to evangelicals can be a commercially successful—or at least commercially viable—endeavor. A company could potentially earn a substantial amount of money by marketing directly to evangelicals. One suspects that these game designers regard themselves in a manner similar to that which they use to describe the Tribulation Force “influencers” in the *Left Behind* games: “an effective spiritual warrior—capable of lifting every spirit within earshot of the inspirational message. No one is immune to the melodic voice—it soothes the savagery of man and is truly a divine gift” (33). The *Left Behind* games are not just entertainment. They are vehicles for active religious engagement.

Although their soundtracks feature work by a renowned composer, other aspects of the *Left Behind* games are less impressive. The gameplay and graphics are not polished, and similar in design to games produced by smaller “indie” companies during that time. That the first game

in this survey, *Tribulation Force*, is similar in both gameplay and graphically to other indie games produced and released around the same time is not remarkable, but it is noteworthy that *Tribulation Force* and *Eternal Forces* are identical games. The fact that designers did not update gameplay or graphics in *Eternal Forces* during the three years that elapsed between these games' releases dates indicates that the developers were unconcerned about their audience's expectations regarding the evolution of gameplay and graphics. This lack of concern suggests that the designers understood that their product had a preexisting audience that might be more attracted to the product, and interested in the rhetoric and theology present in the product, than with playing a game that resembles secular games released during that time.

*Tribulation Force* and *Eternal Forces* are essentially the same game. Borrowing code is commonplace and "isn't theft," argues Liel Leibovitz (5). Much like authors and film directors, game designers build on the work their others have contributed to the field when they create new texts, but a distinction must be made between borrowing code and design elements and making minor changes to a preexisting game and attempting to claim that it is a distinct product. This act, while not theft, is certainly deceptive and cheats the audience both out of money paid for the later game and time spent playing it.

The games' lack of originality might not matter to its core audience. The *Left Behind* games are based on the immensely popular *Left Behind* novels and the books' film adaptations, which in turn are based on dispensational premillennialism, a controversial theory. First developed by John Nelson Darby in the nineteenth century, dispensationalist premillennialism states that, after Christians vanish to heaven during the Rapture, the Antichrist will come to power. Seven years of worldwide hardship will occur, during which individuals who became

Christians after the Rapture will suffer under the rule of the Antichrist. After this period, Jesus will return to Earth, and a final battle between good and evil will occur.

Diegetic and nondiegetic elements influence players' interpretation of these games' content. Communication scholar Mark J. P. Wolf explains that by "placing the video game's action within a detailed narrative context, the game's diegetic world is given a greater illusion of depth, and the player, as the story's main character, is given motivation so that there is more at stake than if the game's action were merely some random, meaningless exercise" (101). This is especially true when religious elements are integral to the story. Not only are individuals who play the *Left Behind* games interacting with the onscreen action, they are also confronting digital representations of whom they perceive to be their enemies and actively choosing whether to convert or kill them. In this way, the *Left Behind* games exist in the *Left Behind* canon and as part of the larger body of literature devoted to dispensationalist premillennialism. The *Left Behind* games encourage—perhaps even force—players to adopt, or continue to adhere to, this very narrow doctrine. By encouraging players to view non-Christians as entities that can be converted, and then repurposed as units that can spread Christianity, or killed, the *Left Behind* games encourage a disturbingly xenophobic and intolerant worldview. This content also defines the games' audience. It is unlikely that individuals who are not inclined to hold these views would be inclined to play these games. Playing the *Left Behind* games is not necessarily a form of religious activity, but it could be a way for devout, conservative Christians to connect their eschatological interpretations of biblical prophecy to contemporary American culture, or at least a fictional depiction of it. In this way, the *Left Behind* games are similar to other games that are set in post-apocalyptic dystopias; they allow players to escape to a world that they might have thought about before, but engaging with this world is not automatically a spiritual experience.

## *Darksiders*

Like the *Left Behind* games, *Darksiders* is a video game based on an interpretation of the Book of Revelation. However, these franchises are markedly different. Like the *Left Behind* games, *Darksiders* is inspired by a biblical text and its interpretation. However, the same tendentious eschatological interpretations that shape *Left Behind* do not influence *Darksiders*' content. In *Darksiders* (2010), the player plays as the character War, one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, summoned to Earth after the seventh seal is broken and Armageddon has begun. Heaven's and Hell's respective armies are at battle. As the plot progresses, one learns that Armageddon began ahead of schedule; the seventh seal was never broken, and War is blamed for falsely starting this battle between good and evil on Earth. Taking on the role of War, the game player is given the chance to demonstrate this character's innocence and uncover the conspiracy that led to the untimely end of the world. *Darksiders*' story, initially inspired by a literalist interpretation of the Book of Revelation, quickly deviates from this strict framework. This departure from a literalist interpretation of the plot of Book of Revelation is not significant enough to be considered by most Christians as heretical, but it is worthwhile to note that *Darksiders*' plot rewrites Scripture to an extent, and, through gameplay, makes its player an accomplice in this act. *Darksiders* is a fictional text that does not present itself as potentially based in fact, despite its affiliation with an interpretation of the Book of Revelation that some conservatives would consider historically accurate, but has not yet occurred on the temporal plane as prophesized. Any changes *Darksiders* makes to the narrative in Revelation are not potentially problematic or to be taken as theologically meaningful.

Released by now-defunct secular companies Vigil Games and THQ, *Darksiders* is available on CD-ROM or via download for commonly used platforms, including Xbox 360,

PlayStation 3, and Microsoft Windows. A well designed game featuring user-friendly gameplay, *Darksiders*'s release on these platforms indicates that the designers wanted to maximize the potential audience for this game. *Darksiders* has an ERSB rating of "M" (Mature), which states the intended audience is age seventeen or older. This is the target audience for the game's content, but certainly not the only demographic that will play *Darksiders*. *Darksiders*'s graphics are comparable in design and quality to games created and released in 2010. *Darksiders*'s soundtrack features original compositions by Cris Velasco, Mike Reagan, and Scott Morton, composers who have had success with various secular projects.

*Darksiders* does not contain a clear sociopolitical message, and non-Christians characters' religious affiliations are not clearly identified. *Darksiders* does not depict government agencies as evil, a marked difference from the *Left Behind* games. This content makes the game less potentially controversial than the *Left Behind* games. Additionally, the absence of a clear sociopolitical agenda and the relatively conventional interpretation of the Book of Revelation makes the game more appealing to a wider audience than the *Left Behind* games. A friend, an experienced video game player who has personal experience with evangelical Christianity, stated that he did not know that *Darksiders* was a Christian video game because, to him, its content, gameplay, and game design made the game seem less like a text informed by theological interpretations than straightforward entertainment. As a result, playing *Darksiders* is not analogous to engaging in religious activity. Nevertheless, *Darksiders* provides an example of game designers appropriating graphic design and gameplay design concepts from secular games and using them to create a Christian text.

### *Dance Praise and Guitar Praise*

Because their content is so similar, I will discuss *Dance Praise* and *Guitar Praise* together. Unlike the other games in this study, *Dance Praise* (2005) and *Guitar Praise* (2008) do not involve potentially violent gameplay, and neither game draws inspiration from Christian eschatology. Both games were developed and published by Digital Praise, a Christian company; rated “E,” suitable for every player, by the ESRB; and released on CD-ROMs compatible with Microsoft Windows. Like the *Left Behind* games, it appears that the game designers who created *Dance Praise* and *Guitar Praise* targeted a broad audience simply by designing a game that works with the most commonly installed computer operating system. The games’ rating and the platform for which they were released indicate that the designers wanted the games to appeal to a general audience, and one likely composed of individuals who enjoy playing secular versions of these games.

*Dance Praise* (2005) provides players with the opportunity to test their flexibility, dexterity, and ability to dance along with Contemporary Christian Music by artists like tobyMac and Steven Curtis Chapman. Borrowing from the immensely popular *Dance Dance Revolution* (*DDR*) game franchise, *Dance Praise* offers players the chance to learn dance routines choreographed to dance music, requiring the player to be physically and mentally active. The player must match the direction, pace, and rhythm of her steps on the game pad with those of the arrows on her computer monitor. Players can play alone or against each other. *Dance Praise*, like its secular inspiration *DDR*, requires players to select a song and a skill level, and the player then must attempt to match her steps on the game pad along with the arrows listed on the screen. The gameplay is relatively easy for the player to understand. The gameplay is comparable to secular



games designed and released during the same period, but its graphics that would be considered dated and subpar at the time of its release.

Designed to be a Christian version of *Guitar Hero*, the immensely popular secular video game that allows players to play along with popular songs on a plastic guitar-cum-controller, *Guitar Praise* allows players can play alone or against each other. Like *Dance Praise*, *Guitar Praise* requires the player to be physically and mentally active. Clearly inspired by the popular *Guitar Hero* franchise, *Guitar Praise* offers players the opportunity to play along with Christian Contemporary Music on a toy guitar, competing against themselves and other players for the best score. The player must match the pace and rhythm of her taps on the controller with those of the triangles on her computer monitor. The gameplay and graphics are comparable to secular games designed and released during the same period. Players can select from over fifty songs with which to play along, including songs by artists popular in the Christian community, such as Newsboys, Skillet, and tobyMac, and bands known outside of the Christian community, such as Flyleaf. The game promises to be entertaining, but it requires considerable financial investment on the player's part. The player must purchase the game as well as the guitar controller; in most cases, these items are bundled and sold together. The game does not have a steep learning curve, but it is certainly not easy, especially for the novice player. *Guitar Praise's* graphics are comparable, with respect to design and animation, to secular games released during the same time.

Both *Dance Praise* and *Guitar Praise* require players to select a song and a skill level. The gameplay is relatively easy for the player to understand, especially if the player has experience with the secular game analogs. *Dance Praise* and *Guitar Praise* function well on their own, as texts that borrow from, but are not dependent on, popular secular games. Neither *Dance*

*Praise* nor *Guitar Praise* have plots. The games' purpose is to select songs and dance along with predetermined choreography, whether with one's feet (*Dance Praise*) or hands (*Guitar Praise*). In each game, the player's ability to perform the established choreographed movements determines his or her progress through the game's various levels. The player can choose between different songs and levels of difficulty in both games, thus providing players with multiple ways of entering the game. In *Dance Praise*, the avatar is determined by the game level; both genders are represented at different points in the game. The player cannot choose which avatar represents him or her onscreen, which eliminates the player's ability to customize gameplay and engage with the game on a deeper level. *Guitar Praise* does not feature an avatar, which renders this game even less personalized than *Dance Praise*.

*Dance Praise's* and *Guitar Praise's* designers seem to assume that the games' players are Christian. This assumption is similar to that made by *Left Behind's* designers, and it allows them to create a product that caters to adolescent Christian needs and desires, such as listening to music that appeals to them on an aesthetic level and follows many secular conventions with respect to song structure. The game does not seem intended to convert players to Christianity, but rather to affirm their faith and involvement in the Christian community by engaging in religiously oriented entertainment, eschewing secular music in favor of songs that, despite their overt Christian themes, sound similar to contemporary secular Top 40 music. Both *Dance Praise* and *Guitar Praise* provide Christian music fans with an opportunity to engage with music they enjoy, and this activity can also function as a form of active devotion and religious meditation. *Dance Praise* allows players to engage with their religion on a physical level. For some players, gameplay could be a form of meditation; they could focus their attention on the lyrics of a song while matching their footfalls, or controller tapping, with its rhythm. Regardless of how players

use these games, a few facts about *Dance Praise* and *Guitar Praise* are clear. Their lyrical content is overtly Christian. These games provide the most straightforward examples of games designed to appeal to their players' preexisting religious convictions, not evangelize to potential converts.

## **Conclusion**

This study of evangelical video games demonstrates that this form of Christian entertainment does not exist in a vacuum. It borrows a great deal from secular video games with respect to game design and game play. By offering adolescents a religiously informed alternative to secular video games, evangelical game developers create a category of gamer: the religious gamer. It also demonstrates that the religious gamer has at least a superficial understanding of the secular video game industry. This understanding can account for the religious video gamer's interest in religiously informed games; perhaps he or she is tired of playing secular games that do not provide spiritually stimulating material, or the gamer simply wants entertainment that will reinforce one's religious convictions. These games also indicate that evangelical video game designers have experience with secular games, as either consumers or designers.

Harry J. Brown argues that "we would be naïve to think that violent videogames 'literally' teach us to be criminals, but we would be equally naïve to think that videogames do not have the potential to influence thoughts and actions" (98). I posit that this argument can be expanded to encompass videogames' potential to disseminate and reinforce religious teachings. While a videogame might not inspire a person to kill non-Christians or attempt to convert them into paramilitary units like in the *Left Behind* games, these games have the potential to further

dehumanize non-Christians in these players' eyes. While this outcome is not guaranteed, the developers' blasé approach to constructing the Other in these games promises to be problematic.

These games do not teach players how to be Christian. The *Left Behind* games allow players to enter a world in which their interpretation of the End Times shapes reality, and it allows them to engage with exegesis in an entertaining way. *Dance Praise* and *Guitar Praise* do not provide players with an interpretation of Scripture, but allows them to engage in a form of meditation with music with overt Christian themes. *Darksiders* is the outlier in this study. Unlike the other games in this survey, *Darksiders*, despite drawing inspiration from the Book of Revelation, lacks overt Christian themes. Unlike the *Left Behind* games, *Dance Praise*, and *Guitar Praise*, *Darksiders* does not offer instruction related to any aspect of Christian dogma or identity. This significant difference between the games indicates that Christian video game designers are not single-minded in their approach to creating games. It also indicates that their target audience is not always Christian. This approach to game design, and later marketing, indicates that these video game companies understand the potential appeal and economic viability of biblically influenced games that are not overtly Christian or religious.

There is a clear correlation between a game's overtly religious content and whether its developer and publisher are companies with clear religious affiliations. That *Darksiders*, which was developed by secular companies, lacks overt religious messages makes sense from an economic perspective. Unlike *Dance Praise*, *Guitar Praise*, and the *Left Behind* games,<sup>45</sup> the companies responsible for developing and publishing *Darksiders* are not first and foremost interested in affirming players' religious faith. Alienating religiously unaffiliated potential

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<sup>45</sup> *Dance Praise* and *Guitar Praise* were developed and published by Digital Praise. The *Left Behind* games were developed and published by the now-defunct Inspired Media Entertainment and Left Behind Games, Inc.

consumers could irreparably damage a game's commercial viability. Nevertheless, the fact that *Darksiders* is based on an interpretation of a biblical text indicates that the game's developer and publisher assumed that potential consumers would accept a product with some references to religion, as long as it is not evangelistic in nature.

This approach to game design seems to be an apparent contradiction with Christian teachings to evangelize. Perhaps game designers view their games as stealthily religious, intended to implant religious ideas in players' minds that they will later revisit, potentially transforming players spiritually. On the other hand, game designers might simply want to create games that will reach a larger audience. Poorly designed games that contain potentially offensive interpretations of Scripture, such as the *Left Behind* games, or games that feature songs with overt Christian themes, such as *Dance Praise* and *Guitar Praise*, are less likely to be economically successful than games that can appear secular. Regardless of designers' intentions, it is unsurprising that the game with the least amount of overt religious content is also the best designed game. This game does not have a preexisting audience that essentially guarantees at least modest commercial success among its target audience.

## Conclusion

### The Meaning and Future of Religious Media Studies

My primary goal for this dissertation was to explore the numerous ways in which evangelical culture adapts to and borrows from secular culture, and how individuals use these tactics to create media for adolescents in the evangelical community. To achieve this, I explored three distinct types of media: young adult literature, comics, and video games. I chose to focus on these media because of their appeal to adolescents, although other audiences consume the aforementioned categories of texts. These texts provide ample evidence of evangelicals' contact with secular culture, and they demonstrate that evangelicals do not live in a sociopolitical or cultural vacuum.

Christian content creators' propensity to borrow from secular culture is evident in the texts they produce. These texts have the potential to shape a generation of adolescent consumers' worldviews. This is true irrespective of the texts' creators' intentions. These texts comprise a spectrum of sociopolitical orientations. Some texts, like the novel *The Princess Spy* and the graphic novel *Judith*, contain (somewhat) feminist perspectives, while others, like the novel *The Last Thing I Remember* and the graphic novel *2048*, contain more conservative sociopolitical messages. Some texts, like Andrew Klavan's *Crazy Dangerous* and the *Left Behind* video games, display overt and troubling antipathy toward non-Christians. One cannot ignore that these texts have the potential to inform adolescents' understanding of their religion and has the potential to shape their worldviews.

My goal is not to assert that the individuals who create media for adolescent evangelical audiences necessarily intend to socialize adolescents into a specific worldview (aside from that of general evangelical Christianity, which is the default worldview in this general community),

or that these content creators consciously insert sociopolitical messages in their texts. I eschew this interpretative approach for two reasons. First, it is impossible to know the true intentions of an author. One can make judgments based on textual evidence, but these analyses do not constitute direct insight into an author's mind. Second, an author's intentions are rendered irrelevant once an audience consumes the text. Only the audience's interpretations matter. (And, as in the case of authorial intent, it is impossible to truly know how other individuals interpret a text.) Nevertheless, authors embed messages, and they undoubtedly have the potential to shape audiences. This effect is also evident in secular media. One can read a novel as an adolescent and discover that as she grows older, this text continues to inform how she her role in society, her relationships with other people, and even her position with respect to governmental and religious institutions. However, one cannot predict how adolescents will receive these texts, and whether these texts' implicit and/or explicit messages will shape the consumers' worldviews. An audience might receive a text in a way the author did not intend. This reality renders any investigation into authorial intent purposeless.

The heterogeneity of messages in the texts in this dissertation reflects the fact that evangelicals are not a monolithic group. Evangelicals can occupy numerous positions simultaneously, often blending categories; they can be of any number of denominations, or none at all; they can hold politically conservative, moderate, or progressive views; they can identify as having any ethnicity or sexual orientation. There is no "correct" form of an evangelical in a global sense. These restrictions, if they are placed on the community at all, often come from within its more conservative factions, and are by no means universal, or fundamental, traits of evangelical Christianity. This diversity in the American evangelical community affects its adolescent members. The remarkable number of texts available produced by this community

offers evangelical adolescents multiple entertainment options—and exposure to diverse philosophical and theological interpretations found in those texts. In a way, evangelical Christianity can become a choose-your-own-adventure experience for its adherents, providing the faithful with the opportunity to explore various versions of evangelical Christianity.

American evangelicals are a varied group in many respects, yet united by shared preoccupations that often conflict with messages found in contemporary secular culture. For example, American evangelicals promote chastity. Despite this pervasive message, evangelicals display a range of reactions of varying degrees of stringency and pressure assigned explicitly to girls and women to preserve their sexual “purity.” Although some texts, such as *The Princess Spy* and *There You’ll Find Me* contain some feminist content, these texts globally promote adherence to traditional gender roles. These texts promote heteronormativity and do not depict LGBTQ characters. Admittedly, I did not review every evangelical text published by an American Christian media company for this study; however, I designed the methodological framework used to select texts for each chapter’s survey with the intention to accurately represent these media. Thus, I can say with certainty that, although some outliers may exist, evangelical texts largely conform to and promote heteronormative, cis-gender perspectives. Evangelicals also display a suspicion of the Other, whether that individual is of a different ethnic, political, social, or religious background. I assert that this perspective is a result of their faith’s emphasis on the conversion of individuals to evangelical Christianity. The mere act of evangelizing to others, one doctrine of evangelical Christianity, rests on the belief that individuals must be transformed into evangelicals in order to be morally and spiritually acceptable, which is certainly an intolerant perspective.



The discussion of evangelical young adult literature in the first chapter illustrates a number of important aspects of my general argument regarding the nature of evangelical media. The survey of fifteen texts demonstrates that evangelical authors do not adopt or promote a single, uniform orientation toward, or away from, interpretations of gender roles, romantic relationships, sociopolitical views, and popular and secular culture. For individuals who exist outside of the evangelical community, these findings are perhaps unexpected; nevertheless, individuals who are aware of the diversity present in evangelical culture would be unsurprised.

These texts provide insight into the culture in which the authors lived, and which informed their writing. The texts reflect the author's sociopolitical milieu (e.g., Andrew Klavan's very politically and socially conservative rhetoric in *Crazy Dangerous* and *The Last Thing I Remember* and the feminism present in Melanie Dickerson's *The Princess Spy*). These texts also reflect familiarity with secular texts (e.g., Jenny B. Jones' reference to *Twilight*, a text with which a majority of adolescents in the first decade of the twenty-first century would be familiar at least superficially, in *There You'll Find Me*). It is myopic to think that evangelicals can exist within American culture and not be influenced by American secular culture—unless they completely shun any contact with individuals outside of their communities. With some exceptions, such as members of the Quiverfull movement, evangelicals are unlikely to withdraw from larger culture. Some texts seem to have a clear connection to secular culture. For example, *Shadow Chaser*'s plot and setting are similar to the *Harry Potter* series, which conservative evangelicals decried as promoting witchcraft. *Shadow Chaser* allows individuals with these perceptions of *Harry Potter*, and other similar books, to enjoy fantasy novels that do not challenge their conservative evangelical beliefs.

These texts only share an orientation toward Christianity. They display a remarkable amount of sociopolitical and philosophical diversity. This lack of uniformity further illustrates that evangelical Christianity is not monolithic, but rather is comprised of a number of communities, each with authors who create content for adolescents in their communities. These novels serve a didactic purpose. Through them, authors teach adolescents what behavior and thoughts are appropriate, thus socializing them to be adults in that community. In this way, young adult evangelical literature functions in a similar way as cultural myths, teaching individuals how to act appropriately in their society.

Like literature, Christian comics is not an easily defined and described genre. The nature of comics allows generic flexibility. In turn, this allows for a number of topics to be the subject of graphic storytelling. It allows multiple authors and artists to draw from the same subject matter, but to tell their stories in radically different ways. For example, a number of graphic novels studied for this dissertation discuss the life of Jesus. While their content comes from the Gospels, their visual styles are very different. This allows the genre to expand in various ways, ranging from conservative and more orthodox interpretations of Scripture to modern and/or fictionalized depictions of biblical stories.

Comics also allow authors and artists to imbue their texts with additional meaning that is impossible if one is constrained to only using language. Choices, such as whether to print pictures in color or black and white, or to use manga or more “American” styles of art, impart additional meaning to a text. A rendering of the Bible into manga, for example, makes biblical stories seem fresh and visually interesting. *Messiah, Volume 1: Origin*'s illustrations, for example, look like oil paintings, giving the text a high art aesthetic and imbuing it with additional gravitas.

Like literature and comics, video games provide adolescents with entertainment that can also teach them about their religious traditions and socialize them into their communities. These games do not teach players how to be Christian; instead, they provide individuals with entertainment that affirms their faith and can, in the case of the *Left Behind* games, provide players with a biased interpretation of the world that exists outside of evangelical communities.

This study of evangelical video games demonstrates that this form of Christian entertainment does not exist in a vacuum. It borrows a great deal from secular video games with respect to game design and game play. By offering adolescents a religiously informed alternative to secular video games, evangelical game developers help create a category of gamer: the religious gamer. It also demonstrates that the religious gamer has at least a superficial understanding of the secular video game industry. This understanding can account for the religious video gamer's interest in religiously informed games; perhaps he or she is tired of playing secular games that do not provide spiritually stimulating material, or the gamer simply wants entertainment that will reinforce one's religious convictions. These games also indicate that evangelical video game designers have experience with secular games, either as consumers or designers, and demonstrate no ethical or religious objections to appropriating the medium to suit their spiritual needs. Playing a video game does not tacitly mean that one will adopt the philosophies present in them and disseminated by them. Nevertheless, a game that features the dehumanization of non-Christians has the potential to influence players' perceptions, and thus are problematic.

These games do not teach players how to be Christian, but they can function as a way to disseminate Christian ideas. The *Left Behind* games allow players to enter a digital world constructed around dispensational premillennialism. *Dance Praise* and *Guitar Praise* do not

provide players with an interpretation of Scripture, but they feature music informed by Scripture and allows players to engage in a form of meditation. *Darksiders* differs from the other texts in this study. Unlike the other games, *Darksiders* lacks overt Christian themes, despite the fact that the Book of Revelation inspires its plot. These significant differences between the games indicates that Christian video game designers are not single-minded in their approach to creating games, and it hints that they understand that their target audience is not always Christian. It also provides insight into how commercially savvy Christian content creators can be. Unlike *Left Behind* games, *Dance Praise*, and *Guitar Praise*, and the companies responsible for developing and publishing *Darksiders* do not appear to be interested in affirming players' religious faith. This supports the idea that the game's creators intended it to be a viable commercial product that could appeal to a large range of individuals, regardless of their affiliation with evangelical Christianity, thus expanding the game's marketability and potential sales. Nevertheless, the fact that *Darksiders* is based on an interpretation of a biblical text indicates that the game's developer and publisher assumed that potential consumers would accept a product with some references to religion, as long as it is not evangelistic in nature. It could also indicate that the Book of Revelation, and Christian eschatology in general, is so ingrained in Western culture that one need not be a devout Christian to find a game about a supernatural battle at the end of the world intriguing.

It is my hope that my work with the general topic of evangelical media produced for an adolescent audience provides other individuals with a foundation to continue exploring American evangelical media. Literature, comics, and video games are only a sampling of the media created by and for this culture. Future explorations of this topic could investigate other germane matters. A potential research project could track adolescent evangelicals' consumption

of media, and chart their sociopolitical and religious maturation with respect to the age at which adolescents consume specific texts. This study could provide insight into the degree to which texts can influence adolescents' worldviews. However, this study is also fraught with potential problems. Texts alone do not influence adolescents' behavior and intellectual development. A number of factors influence individuals' worldviews, and texts are just one example. One would need to account for the impact of other influences to accurately assess the influence Christian texts have on audiences. Nevertheless, if one could develop a methodology to manage these issues, this study could provide insight into individuals' media preferences and any corresponding sociopolitical and religious beliefs.

Another potential research project that could expand on my work is an investigation into the marketing and distribution of evangelical texts. This would include questions regarding which retailers carry these items and which parts of the country have the most distributors and largest market. In turn, this could be compared with adolescents' self-reported church attendance and religious affiliation. This research could provide insight into whether increased access to Christian texts correlates with increased church attendance and self-identified religious affiliation. The results of this research could potentially answer any questions regarding the didactic and socializing value of texts. However, this research topic has potential issues, the most significant being that texts alone do not influence human behavior. If one could account for this and adjust data collection accordingly, this topic could provide considerable insight into how texts can influence a generation that, according to Pew Research Center data, seems less inclined toward religious affiliation than previous generations ("America's Changing Religious Landscape").

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## Vita

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