

Wonder Woman #758: A Christian Perspective

****Spoiler Alert: This document covers the plot and ending in a fair amount of detail.****

The Phantom Stranger, for those who don't know him, is one of at least six major DC Comics characters who have obvious Christian ties. The others are Eclipso (the Old Testament Angel of Death who later rebelled), the Spectre (the souls of several dead humans who took Eclipso's position after his fall), Zauriel (a former archangel not mentioned in the Bible who gave up his angelic station to pursue a woman he fell in love with) and Cain and Abel (who hosted the horror series "House of Mystery" and "House of Surprise" respectively). There is also a host of lesser characters with strong Christian ties who frequent the pages of their comics, usually in the role of the "anti-hero." Azrael is perhaps the most famous of these dubious characters. He is a member of the Order of Saint Dumas, an extremist cult which seeks to purify the world of sin through assassinations. Father Valley is a more recently revealed member of this cult, and in his first appearance he was hired to kill Catwoman. We also have "Preacher," who is a priest that has been possessed by an angel who escaped Heaven. Not all Christian-based characters are heroes or villains, either. Catwoman's sister Maggie (full name Magdalene, a very Biblical name) was once a nun. There are many others who, while not appearing often, were confronted in some of the most epic stories DC produces, but for simplicity I will not include them on this list. Furthermore, one can easily argue that the super-villain Darkseid (pronounced "dark side") is really Satan himself, going by a different name. And in Vertigo Comics, a subsidiary of DC designed for the more "mature" comic stories, we find Constantine (whose themes often encompass very esoteric, but non-canonical, Catholic mythology), and the TV show "Lucifer" was a spin-off of the Sandman comic series. Christianity, for better or worse, has been a major influence in the DC universe. Furthermore, I hope the descriptions above are sufficient to demonstrate just how heavily the Catholic faith influences the DC universe, either by clear implication (Order of Saint Dumas) or explicit details (Preacher, Constantine). I believe Christians would be wise to see how our faith is represented and misrepresented in their stories while our youth read them. In all fairness to Marvel Comics, they also have some Christian ties, but nothing like DC. While DC incorporates both the good and the bad, Marvel seems to only focus on Hell and the devils who inhabit it. Also, while DC seems to favor Catholicism, Marvel seems to focus on fundamentalist views.

The Phantom Stranger is the spirit of a man with an unmentioned sin so great that he has spent millennia serving justice using his incredible mystic powers to atone for it. In the decades since his inception in 1952, who he was and what crime he committed had been a mystery. In Wonder Woman #758 (released in September 2020), we finally find out that he is Judas Iscariot. In hindsight, this should not be surprising as only Cain and Adam seem to have committed crimes that would warrant this punishment, and Cain was already being used in other comics. But I am not writing this article simply to make this announcement, but rather to address the Christian issues concerning justice that this comic addresses, especially considering how big the development was.

The story spanned nine issues, including an annual, and focused on the second oldest recurring villain Wonder Woman has faced: Paula von Gunther (Doctor Poison was the first of her recurring villains). Paula first appeared in Sensation Comics #4 (April, 1942), which was only the fifth appearance of Wonder Woman herself. Through the decades since then, we have had several incarnations of Paula, but in this incarnation she is the last living descendant of the Valkyrie queen Gurda. Gurda attempted to destroy Wonder Woman's homeland of Themyscira several millennia ago, but was killed in the attempt.

Over the first seven issues, we see Paula's plan for vengeance grow into fruition and near victory, until she is finally defeated by Wonder Woman at the end of the eighth issue. It is only at her defeat that the Phantom Stranger appears. He turns Paula to stone and takes her to the front of the Heavenly Gate to the Silver City (we can call this place outside the gates Purgatory). So we see that not only is this a Christian-based story, but that it is based on the apostolic tradition (Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican). It is this last issue of this mini-saga, in which Wonder Woman and Phantom Stranger fight, that interests me.

As the two heroes fight, both claim to be fighting for Paula's soul, and both earnestly want her to be freed from her sins. Phantom Stranger wants Paula to face God ("the Presence") and be punished, while Wonder Woman wants Paula to find her own path to redemption. What may be missed here is that, by Wonder Woman allowing Paula to *choose* her redemption, Paula will be actively seeking her redemption (what Christians call "conversion"), as opposed to it being forced upon her. As the battle rages, we learn that Phantom Stranger watched and even influenced the von Gunthers to commit more and more crimes, knowing that they would build on each other's sins until the family's collective sin on Paula matched his own. It was his hope that their collective guilt would balance out the sin of his own betrayal of Jesus.

Admitting this deceit at the end of the fight, he is taken away by the Presence, claiming "I did it in your name!" (i.e., Jesus). The confession and disappearance of the Phantom Stranger are especially noteworthy. The Phantom Stranger, in his confession, admits he did not act on charity, but that he was abusing his power. This makes his final words both sad and revealing. When I read this, I recalled Matthew 7:21-23, when Jesus warned that there would be those who drove away demons in His name, but He won't know them.

After the Phantom Stranger is gone, the Presence speaks to Wonder Woman and tells her that she was right (Gurda needed to convert of her own free will). This, among several other incidents I will shortly address, strongly suggests that the Book of Job inspired this story. Wonder Woman replied with a challenge, claiming that the Presence should have foreseen this would happen. After all, it was The Presence that gave Judas the powers. The Presence gives a cryptic reply, one that clearly echoes the ending of the Book of Job: "You know not what you speak."

Undaunted, Wonder Woman rails in response with, "Forgiveness is a **gift**, not a **prize**. One the **Stranger** deserves. ... **[the Amazon way]** is to offer **patience**, not **punishment**. **Consider** that. Consider mercy ... consider my words." (bold original)

Now that the key points of the plot are presented, let us look to the theology of the book. To begin with, notice what the Phantom Stranger and Wonder Woman are fighting over: *how* Paula's soul could be saved. Wonder Woman, based on Amazon philosophy, wants Paula to work out her own salvation (self-examination). Phantom Stranger wishes to punish Paula (atonement). From a Christian point of view, both are needed. It takes *both* a personal path of self-examination (for forgiveness) *and* atonement (to be made perfect, consider Revelation 21:27). Biblical purification has always been described as involving sacrifice (pain). Old Covenant purification always needed to be renewed, because even though the sacrifice forgave the previous sins of the people, the people only sinned again. While Jesus became the ultimate sacrifice that forgave all sins past and future, we are still far from perfect as we continue to sin. This imperfection is not allowed in Heaven (Revelation 21:27), so we still have a need for atonement so Jesus the healer can repair the wound in our soul that keeps bringing us to sin. And we have to consent to this healing, otherwise Jesus will respect our will to refuse it. The Phantom Stranger was denying Paula her free will in this manner.

One lesson we can take from Job is that honest rebellion is preferable to God over mere orthodoxy. Wonder Woman, just like Job, was rebelling against the Presence, but she was being honest in her complaint. Like Job, she was called righteous for doing so. And, despite being called righteous, neither Job nor Wonder Woman are given answers to their questions. Phantom Stranger, like Job's friends, was using the established system to achieve his goals, was declared wrong for doing so, and was punished. But, unlike Job, I think in Wonder Woman's case we actually see an understanding of how salvation works. It must begin with the sinner seeking salvation (called "conversion"), only then can true atonement be made. Punishment (suffering) will happen with or without conversion. Those who refuse to be converted will permanently suffer by being forever separated from God, while those who do convert will only temporarily suffer as Jesus the healer purges the impurities from their soul.

I am sure that these claims on salvation will be met with skepticism from many Protestants, so let me present my evidence here. God is constantly beckoning sinners to come back to Him through the prophets of the Old Testament (the Book of Hosea is my favorite) and through Jesus ("Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" Matthew 4:17). That we must suffer to be rid of sins is based on the idea that there is conflict between our spirits (which seek God) and our bodies (which seek selfishness). Our spiritual anguish comes from this conflict. Jesus Himself tells us, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." (Matthew 26:41) We must lord over our bodies to find God, and this is rarely a pleasant business. Even so, none of us can do this perfectly. Jesus offers to help us ("For my yoke is easy and my burden light" (Matthew 11:38)), but we can turn away ("Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how many times I yearned to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were unwilling!" (Luke 13:34)). Spiritual purity is not *pleasant*, but with the help of Jesus it is *possible*.

The next topic I would like to address is the "sins of the father are the sins of the son" mentality of the Phantom Stranger. The comic story did move from a patriarchal inheritance of sin to a matriarchal one. Considering the story focuses on Amazons and Valkyries, I have no problem with this literary license, as there is a much more important issue at stake here than genderism. It was not possible for Paula to sin enough for the Phantom Stranger's goals to be met, he had to ensure that the sins of her ancestors were piled on top of it. This is somewhat biblical (Exodus 20:5), although Ezekiel 18:20 explicitly reversed this and claimed that sins are one's own. The Phantom Stranger somehow arranged for Paula to become every Valkyrie before her, taking on the life and death of every one. This is literally what Christians believe Jesus did for all humans. Judas obviously missed this point. Despite working for the Presence for 2,000 years, the Phantom Stranger still fails to accept Jesus as his savior. Instead, he has attempted to create his own savior, a savior that is modeled after Jesus. Not only that, but the Phantom Stranger's whole plan is really just an elaborate version of the Jewish practice of scapegoating -- placing one's sins on another to be sacrificed. Judas is still trapped in the Old Covenant mentality, and fails to understand how the new covenant changed that dynamic. Despite presumably being there, Judas failed to understand the lesson Jesus taught in John 9:1-5 about the man born blind. When asked which parent caused the man's blindness, Jesus claimed no sin took place at all. With Christ, we understand that while the sins of our ancestors shaped the world we are in today, the sins we have are our own.

For my next point, I want to go back to the scapegoat idea. There is a subtle but critical difference Jesus made in regards to scapegoating. Scapegoating got its name from the Jewish practice, but every non-Christian culture practiced it in one form or another. All non-Christian religions placed the focus of the scapegoat on those who committed the sin. Specifically, the focus was on how they would benefit from the scapegoat. The scapegoat was merely a tool to be used for someone else's

benefit. But Jesus turned the emphasis on its head by becoming the scapegoat, and we are called to follow his example ("whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me" (Matthew 16:24)). We are no longer to offer scapegoats for our sins, we are to become the scapegoat. The Phantom Stranger, still looking at reality as a Jew does, would have failed in his attempt even if Wonder Woman did not stop him. The Presence gave Judas Iscariot the ability to be the scapegoat by becoming the Phantom Stranger. Had Judas looked at this role as a means to benefit others through his sacrifice instead of as an obligation, he would have been justified. But he was still in the old mindset of needing to find something else to benefit him. The words the Presence said to Wonder Woman show that the writer understood this. I was quite impressed.

Wonder Woman's challenge to the Presence and His omniscience is reminiscent of Job's searching for answers (as mentioned above). Everyone has a crisis of faith at some point in their lives (and often quite a few). Recall Saint John the Baptist, whom Jesus claims "among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist" (Matthew 11:11), and who was so sure of who Jesus was at the baptism (Matthew 3:13-15). Yet John the Baptist had his doubts later (Luke 7:19). We really can't know the mind of God. Perhaps He allowed the Phantom Stranger so much power so Judas could put others before himself. Perhaps it was to bring the pagan Wonder Woman before the Presence. Perhaps it was a chance for Paula to have faith again. All that we do know from the story as written is that the Presence was watching all along, and that He had His own reasons for doing what He did.

From this point on, however, Wonder Woman portrays her very human failings. Unlike Job, who understood his place, she was not satisfied with the non-answer from the Presence. "Forgiveness is a gift, not a prize." Yes it is. Forgiveness comes from charity, something that must originally come from God. Wonder Woman is perhaps the most forgiving superhero in comic book history, but in her pride and ignorance she thinks it came from her Amazon philosophy. She fails to see it as the theological gift that must first come from the very God she challenged. And even the authors who promote this idea invariably recognize this reality, as many stories of Wonder Woman have the female villains sent to Reform Island, only to break out and cause more trouble later. Interestingly enough, the original Paula incarnation is almost the only success story Reform Island has to offer since its inception in the early 1940's. Even in the original incarnation of Paula, her daughter, who was not a villain so much as a headstrong child, causes mischief after her Amazon training. Wonder Woman is dealing with limited knowledge of the future, whereas the Presence has unlimited knowledge of the future (something Wonder Woman actually admitted in her challenge to the Presence). It is perhaps good of the Amazons to give everyone unlimited chances, as they don't know the outcome. The Presence, however, does know the outcome, and therefore must act accordingly. But let us look at a few examples of Wonder Woman's challenge.

In saying that forgiveness is something "the **Stranger** deserves," (bold original) Wonder Woman fails to see that the Presence already *has* forgiven Judas, just like the father of the prodigal son. But forgiveness, as talked about above, is not enough. Like the prodigal son, one has to return to God for forgiveness to work. The Phantom Stranger did not come back to God, but rather attempted a solution on his own. He took the gifts given him and used them for his own purposes, not the purpose of the Presence.

Next, consider her statement, "Ours is to offer patience, not punishment." I find the first half of this sentence funny, and the second half bankrupt. The first half is funny for several reasons. First of all, God had already waited 2,000 years for Judas to accept God on God's terms, and in the comic book world, it is unlikely that the story ends here. Secondly, the virtue of patience was originally called "long-suffering," of which anyone who has tried to learn patience will attest to the accuracy of the

description. In the end, it was Judas who needed this virtue, not God. It was not God's lack of patience that caused all the grief; it was the Phantom Stranger's.

The second half of the statement is bankrupt because, without punishment, there can be no justice. As C.S. Lewis so well explained in his article "The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment" (which can be found in the collection *God in the Dock*), we can basically treat a wrong in three ways: reform the aggressor, punish him, or make an example of him. These, of course, are *not* mutually exclusive, as any two or even all three can be performed simultaneously. But punishment must *always* be in the mix, or else we do not find justice but tyranny.

Reform does not focus on *what* happened, but *why*. Reform does not look at a crime as a choice someone made, but rather a deficiency in the criminal that hopefully can be fixed. I think helping a criminal to be a better citizen is a noble goal, but it is extremely and dangerously naive to assume that the criminal had no choice in the matter. Removing a deficiency (assuming one exists) may indeed make for a better citizen, but it can also create an even more efficient criminal. But the danger of only looking at reformation at the expense of punishment creates a situation so horrible most people simply want to deny it. If we attempt to reform without a sense of punishment, then we no longer have a crime, but a mental illness. When we have a situation where undesirable behavior is a mental illness instead of a choice, we remove the common man from the legal process and replace a twelve man jury (who presumably represent the moral norms of society) with a single psychiatrist (who represents his practice). When disagreeable behavior is a mental illness, treatment of the disease is decided by a single person whose main concern is running a profitable business. What therapy the patient must go through is decided by this one person. How well the patient is progressing in the therapy is decided by this same person. And this is the same health profession that pioneered frontal lobotomies, electric shock therapy, experimental drugs and all other kinds of ideas on curing insanity. But when disagreeable behavior is considered a choice, then a jury has a say in what types of therapy, if any, are appropriate and at what point the person has suffered enough for his transgression. Even if the jury does not have a *direct* say in this, they are made aware of the intended consequences of giving a guilty verdict, and can decide if the consequences are too excessive for the crime and vote "not-guilty." This jural boycott does work, as a major legal reform was made in England in 1852 as the juries freed many criminals because they felt the punishments were too excessive for the crimes.

If, on the other hand, we try people for the sake of making an example of them without a sense of deserving punishment, then whether or not the person is truly guilty is of no concern. Of course, making an example is an essential part of the judicial process. As we are seeing in the 2020s, crime skyrockets when potential criminals do not believe they will have to suffer for what they do. But we cannot go to the other extreme either. Imagine being on trial for a crime one did not commit. The prosecutor, in his final words to the jury, says, "I know I have a weak case here, but imagine the message being sent to potential criminals if you do not give this person the death penalty." Any such statement, in my opinion, should automatically result in a mistrial and the prosecutor being debarred. But I don't make the rules. And, I'm sorry to say, this is not a crazy, hypothetical example on my part. A police officer was found guilty of killing George Floyd while a near-riotous crowd (encouraged by U.S. Senator Maxine Walters) was outside the courthouse saying they would burn the city down unless at least a 2nd degree murder verdict was given. I'm not going to debate the actual innocence or guilt of the officer in question, but I know I would not want to be on trial where the jury members were fearing for their lives and thereby compelled to pronounce me guilty no matter what the evidence. Again, if the jury looks at the evidence being presented and is made aware of the punishment the accused is going to get if found guilty, then they can decide if the accused will get the punishment they deserve or not.

Getting back to the comic, I want to briefly look at Wonder Woman's final words in her epiphany, "**Consider** that. Consider mercy ... consider my words." (bold original) This comes across to me as someone who realizes they lost the argument and is desperately trying to pull out a last minute victory by getting the other party to become emotional. The wise know when they have won and need not say anymore. "For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom," (1 Corinthians 1:25) comes to mind here. The Presence had said all He had to say and did not need to say anymore. Perhaps God's silence after her final outburst will inspire her to consider her own words as well. Those being her final words, she is likely to think about them more than any other words she said.

In any case, Paula was turned back into flesh, confessed she was weary of the life she had lived ("I -- I remember the blood, the lies ... the manipulation from **everyone** ...and I'm **tired** Diana. I'm so **tired**. I ... I want to be **done** with it", bold original), and decided her own path of redemption. While the good Christian may feel a [justifiable] sense of unease on how she got to this point, I find her life and conversion to have remarkable parallels with that of Saint Paul. Besides the accidental similarities in names, they both engaged in genocide for what they thought was a holy cause, both had a dramatic conversion, and both described a weariness to their lives. Hopefully this incarnation of Paula, like both her original incarnation and that of Saint Paul, will be a major player on the side of goodness in the days to come.

I don't know if the writer knowingly made it work out like this or not, or if it just felt right for the story to unfold like it did. While there have been many times that DC has made my skin crawl with how they handled Christian themes, they have also handled them well at times. How the Presence handled the situation in this comic seems to be an example of getting it right. Either way, the writer hit on some very deep subjects and did it with a minimum of storytelling. Sadly, I doubt many readers will realize that what they have read is a modern, pop culture masterpiece of theology, or that it is a contemporary retelling of Job.

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