

How the Bible Influenced Marvel Co-Founder Stan Lee

The comic-book shadow of Stan Lee falls long and far. Central Florida based Kingstone Comics is a superhero travel distance from New York City, but the leading publisher of religious comics knows Stan's Lee's influence will not soon be forgotten.

Lee died Tuesday at age 95.

Kingstone publisher Art Ayris reminisces that, "What a lot of people don't know about Mr. Lee is that not only was he is an extraordinary comics creator and likely the most iconic comics publisher of all time, but that the Bible had an influence on him as well. Stan Lee's birth name was Stanley Lieber, and as most know, he was born and raised in New York City. Much of the comics industry had its origins in the '30s and '40s there, and like a lot of his contemporary comic writers, Stan Lee was Jewish. Stan said that he read the Bible and though not particularly religious, did cite the Bible as an important literary influence. He loved the phraseology of the Scriptures and stated that "It was definitely on my mind when I was writing things like Thor.'"

Ayris adds, "Many of the early comic writers were Jewish immigrants who had a background of a Judeo-Christian morality. That is why many original and major comic book heroes were deeply characterized by clearly cut good and evil characters. They were people of morality, values and even faith. Many would argue that the original superheroes were even Messiah-like characters."

Religious controversy bubbled to the surface this year after ComiCon, when the comics world was socked with the news that DC Comics had just transformed Batman from a superhero

embracing a wholly-other God to (in his own words in Batman No. 53) "God is above us. And he wears a cape." Early Batman comics included religious imagery such as a cross on his parents' gravestones, and many viewed the Wayne family as Episcopalian-Catholic. But the newly evolved Bruce Wayne states, "My father was a Christian. He held hallow the immortal soul, heaven, the Father and the Son." But then he goes on to clarify his new theological position, "I ... put aside ... believing in ... a deity. Or believing in anything my father thought had saved him."

Ayris responds, "There is some level of anti-Christian bias in much of media and entertainment. They have the freedom to create in that manner, but Kingstone seeks to counter that influence with comics and media that explains the faith. Though the company publishes science fiction, action-adventure, fantasy and biographies, it is most well-known for publishing the Kingstone Bible, the most complete graphic adaptation of the Bible ever done. The company recruited over 40 artists with Marvel and DC pedigrees and spent seven years painstakingly illustrating and explaining in comic book form the entire 66 books of the Bible. The three-volume epic tome was a finalist for Young People's Literature in the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association 2017 Book of the Year awards. The Kingstone Bible is not only the most complete graphic adaptation of Holy Writ ever done but is also the largest non-serialized graphic novel ever published.

The company has now begun creating motion-comic animation of several of their products and has discovered broadcasters and digital distributors eager to jump on board. "The transcultural nature of comics has really opened our eyes," Ayris adds. "We began creating motion comics less than 90 days ago. Between our print and digital comics, and now the motion-comic animation, we are already in 33 languages and have been picked up by five global television networks broadcasting into 15 different countries. By last count we are in 95 countries

and growing.”

Kingstone’s media strategy is fueled by research from the American Bible Society showing a disconcerting trend on Bible engagement. The studies showed that clearly a third of Millennials never read the Bible, and with teens, the Bible disconnect is even steeper at a 50 percent non-engagement level. Yet the comics industry grows exponentially each and every year, driven by superhero films. For Ayriss, the intersection of those two trends is something to which evangelicals should pay close attention.

Ayriss closes with, “We have great respect for Stan Lee. He was the barrier-breaker of his generation and will be deeply missed. Almost every giga-budget superhero film has his imprint and influence on it in some way. In many ways, we feel his work has opened the door for us. Because of the ubiquity of Marvel and DC worldwide, when we come into a new region with Marvel-styled religious comics we are immediately accepted. We are grateful for his far-reaching influence and seek to break barriers of our own in modeling his success, and most importantly, letting the Bible influence us in all we do.”