Utopia, Rebellion, and the Kingdom of Heaven in the Legion of Super-Heroes

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Introduced in *Adventure Comics* #247 (1958), the Legion of Super-Heroes inhabit an exciting, optimistic age a thousand years in the future. The Legion stories of the 1950s and 60s represent a teleology of the DC Universe: a future where a millennium of scientific and moral progress have led to a near-perfect society, governed by the principles embodied by Superman in the 20th century. In this utopian future, Earth is governed by a single, cooperative government; automation has eliminated the need for toil; artificial intelligence has diminished the role of tribalism in politics; and most of the inhabited planets of the galaxy have banded together in the mutually beneficial partnership of the United Planets.[1] The Legion themselves are a teenage "superhero club" that eventually encompasses dozens of members, each with a different superpower. In their first appearance, the three founding members of the Legion—Cosmic Boy, Saturn Girl, and Lightning Boy (later Lightning Lad)—travel through time to pay homage to the teenage Clark Kent, then known as Superboy, and bring him to visit their era.[2] For the next three decades, Superboy regularly traveled to the 30th century, joining an ever-growing cast of teen superbeings on dozens of adventures. Part of the same burst of creativity in 1958 under editor Mort Weisinger that introduced the Fortress of Solitude, red kryptonite, Bizarro, and the Bottle

City of Kandor,[3] the Legion were a key part of the mythos that developed around Superman at the dawn of what came to be known as the Silver Age of superhero comics. The Legion's role in Superman's origin is similar to that of Ma and Pa Kent: from his adoptive parents Clark Kent learned to be human, and from his futuristic colleagues he learned to be superhuman.[4] Though later storylines and revisions have often complicated the apparent perfection of the Legion's era, the team is best known for its optimism for the future of the DC Universe.

Within Christianity, the kind of optimism for the future that the Legion represents has frequently been regarded as misguided. Conservative theology has long criticized the idea that a perfect society can be created in the material world. For example, in his book *Utopia: The Perennial Heresy,* conservative Catholic philosopher Thomas Molnar links heterodox movements in the early church with Communists and liberal theologians, concluding that "utopian thinking is itself evil."[5] And yet visions of a perfect earthly kingdom are appear in numerous Biblical texts, like Ezek 36:22-36. Jesus' proclamation of the "Kingdom of God"—the *Basileia tou Theou* (βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ, Kingdom of God) or the *Basileia tōn Ouranōn* (Βασιλεία τῶν Ουρανῶν, Kingdom of Heaven)—has invited the interpretation of a perfect worldly order. In a series of lectures entitled "The Political Meaning of Utopia," theologian Paul Tillich presents a theological basis for considering the Kingdom of Heaven as a temporal utopia. Describing two orders—a horizontal, temporal axis and a vertical, transcendent axis—Tillich unites the perfect society envisioned by modern utopian movements and the eschatological kingdom of the New Testament:

> The vertical order participates in the horizontal order—that is, the kingdom of God is actualized in historical events… This reciprocal participation of the two orders is the solution to the problem of utopia. A kingdom of God that is not involved in historical

> events, in utopian actualization in time, is not the kingdom of God at all but at best only a mystical annihilation of everything that can be 'kingdom'—namely, richness, fullness, manifoldness, individuality. And similarly, a kingdom of God that is nothing but the historical process produces a utopia of progress or revolution whose catastrophic collapse brings about metaphysical disillusionment.[6]

Similarly, New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan offers a close analysis of Jesus' sayings about the Kingdom, concluding that "For Jesus, a Kingdom of beggars and weeds is a Kingdom of here and now."[7] The moral attitude represented in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere in the New Testament points toward the building of a better community now. Lyman Tower Sargent identifies the origin of conservative theological opposition to utopianism as "the common assumption that utopianism is rooted in the denial of original sin"—that is, the idea that humans, being imperfect, cannot create a perfect society.[8] But as Diana Fritz Cates notes, a utopia need not be perfect in every regard: "Yet one function of a utopic vision can be to orient people toward *some* aspects of an ideal society, toward an *approximation* to the ideal, or simply toward the idea of something *better*."[9] For Cates, utopianism is a form of hope, and a counterpart to religious faith: "A person of theological hope… will envision a society that reflects, as much as possible, the goodness at the heart of reality."[10] Similarly, Bronwen Neil defines utopia as "an imaginary landscape of the past or future… which is based on an ideological pursuit of purity and happiness."[11] It is pursuit, rather than attainment, that defines utopia. Thus *contra* Molnar and other conservative theologians, utopianism need not represent a "heretical" belief in the perfectability of humankind, but instead can be an emphasis on the striving for spiritual and material betterment.

In their early appearances in *Adventure Comics*, many of them written by Superman co-creator Jerry Siegel, the Legion presented a society reflecting such an optimistic vision of goodness.[12] Julian Darius describes the Legion's era as "a wonderfully good place, a playful paradise of government order, technological bounty, and generally happy inter-personal relations."[13] Comics writer Gerry Conway called it a "squeaky clean future."[14] The milquetoast nature of this vision of the future didn't please everyone: writer and editor Jim Shooter describes the Legion's stories of the late 1950s and early 60s as "the lamest comic book on Earth."[15] In 1965, at the age of 13, Shooter sent a script for the book, fully laid out with sketchy drawings. His hope was to bring the book more into line with the new energy of the books being published by Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and Steve Ditko at Marvel Comics, which were anything but "squeaky clean," and showed greater engagment with the burgeoning youth culture of the 1960s. Shortly afterwards DC editor Mort Weisinger hired the teenager, who became the Legion's primary writer from 1966-1969, developing a "Marvelesque" style that was revolutionary for DC's books.[16] Shooter notes that his tenure on the title represents "probably the only time in the history of comics where the writer, the characters, and the audience were all the same age."[17] Moreover, the futuristic setting meant that Shooter could avoid the episodic nature of DC's other books of the era: "You could read *Superman* stories in any order. It didn't matter. But there was only one series that was set in the future, and so I owned the future."[18] Shooter hoped to create a 30th century that grew and changed with his characters, a fact perhaps best exemplified by the death of Legionnaire Ferro Lad in *Adventure Comics* #353.[19] Though this more sophisticated tone darkened some of the series' optimism, Shooter's emphasis on a shared, youthful outlook

between writer, audience, and characters shows the continued presence of a utopian attitude throughout his tenure.

After Shooter's departure, the Legion continued to grow in complexity and sophistication, and under the later authorship of writer Paul Levitz and artist Keith Giffen the *Legion of Super-Heroes* came to rival Marvel's *Uncanny X-Men* in its blend of soap opera and superheroics. Levitz and Giffen made it clear that the characters were aging over time: no longer teenagers, they were now young adults, and they would become more mature over the course of Levitz's tenure as author. The events of DC's *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1985-1986)—which reset DC's history and eliminated the Legion's inspiration, Superboy, from continuity entirely—required some complicated restructuring of the Legion's own origins. Following Levitz's departure from the title in 1989, Giffen took over as both artist and writer, with Tom and Mary Bierbaum as co-writers.[20] Under this creative team, the Legion's story jumped five years ahead from where Levitz had left them, and into a distinctly darker future in which the team had disbanded and the galaxy was wracked by war. Giffen's dystopian "Five Years Later" saga culminated with the introduction of a group of younger, more idealistic versions of the characters that may have been either clones or the authentic original Legion frozen in time. With this plot still unresolved, Giffen's authorship concluded with the destruction of the Earth itself, leaving both the cynical older team and the cloned superteens protecting the remnants of humanity as they searched for a new homeworld.

Not long after, the chronology of the DC Universe was adjusted again by the events of *Zero Hour: Crisis in Time* (1994), which had relatively minor effects on the heroes of the 20th century but completely "rebooted" the Legion's chronology. While authors like Levitz and Giffen had allowed the team introduced in 1958 to age into adulthood, the "Reboot Legion,"

initially written by Mark Waid and Tom McCraw, were once again a team of idealistic, teen heroes. By the conclusion of this era writers Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning and artist Olivier Coipel wove a complex space opera that again pulled the team into darker territory, with the team's headquarters destroyed and its core members stranded light years from home in the series *Legion Lost* (2000-2001).

In 2004, the Legion was rebooted again, under writer Mark Waid and artist Barry Kitson. This "Threeboot Legion" inhabited a flawed utopia in which the galaxy's teenagers, weary of the authoritarian peace and security of their parents' surveillance state, begin a deliberately nostalgic rebellion based on the comics of the mid-20th century. At the same time that this series was being published, the original, pre-*Crisis* Legion was reintroduced in "The Lightning Saga," a 2007 crossover between *Justice League of America* and *Justice Society of America* written by Brad Meltzer and Geoff Johns. This "Retroboot Legion" ignored the events of Giffen's "Five Years Later" era, maintaining a version of the more optimistic future of the original Legion. But it also ignored the concurrently-published stories by Waid and Kitson, leading to a multiplicity of continuities. During the *Final Crisis* event (2008-2009), the miniseries *Legion of Three Worlds* by Geoff Johns and George Pérez attempted to reestablish the multiversal standing of the original/Retroboot (1958-1989 and 2007-2013), Reboot (1994-2004), and Threeboot (2004-2009) versions of the Legion. More recently, the series was revived by writer Brian Michael Bendis and artist Ryan Sook in 2019-2020. This "Rebirth Legion" offers an entirely new iteration of the DC Universe's future, this time with Clark Kent's son Jonathan inspiring the heroes of the millennium to come.

Though dystopianism is a factor in Legion stories from the 1980s onwards, utopianism has been present in all of eras of the *Legion of Super-Heroes* and its thousand-year-distant

futures. As critic Darko Suvin notes, science fiction can "be written only between the utopian and the anti-utopian horizons. All imaginable intelligent life, including ours, can be organized only more or less perfectly."[21] The glimpses of the 30th century shown in the Legion's first appearance in 1958's *Adventure Comics* #247 suggest the time-travel utopian narratives of works such as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. As Holly White notes, spatial or temporal travel in utopian literature gives a "view of the utopian group [that] is filtered through the visitors to the community, the 'outsiders' who stumble upon the scene to find a society operating effectively through unfamiliar means."[22] But what is surprising about the Legion's 30th century is precisely its *familiarity*: the Legionnaires take Superboy to a malt shoppe (boasting "nine delicious flavors from nine planets") and even to his own boyhood home, now preserved as a museum next door to a robot factory.[23] This world represents a nostalgia for the present—or, rather, nostalgia for a past that, as Ian Gordon states, "owes little to history and is in effect a disembodied commodity."[24] Writing of the architecture and design of the early Legion stories, Sara K. Ellis notes that the setting of these tales was at the same time "both a nostalgic future and the Main Streets of a disappearing past."[25] Mixed with this nostalgia is a scientific positivism, which Anthony Mills identifies as a key component of DC Comics of the late 1950s: "Science would usher in an age of cooperation and equality. Under editor Julius Schwartz especially, DC of the late 1950s was about the sleek, the new, and the modern, where fortitude and rationality could solve any problem."[26] But a key component of this positivism was the idea of America as a realized utopia. In this, the early Legion of the 1950s-60s is an heir to the World War II-era comics that "forcefully set forth the United States as the embodiment of all that is right."[27] Contrasting DC with the more youth culture-oriented stories published at the same time by Marvel Comics, Mills notes that "DC, even into the 1960s… reinforced middle-class democratic

ideals and white capitalist affluence, while intentionally resisting moral complexity."[28] Glen Weldon—speaking of Superman comics of the early 1960s, but certainly applicable to the early Legion tales as well—writes: "It's telling that when Superman's writers gave themselves license to dream up anything they could, they invariably dreamed the American dream of the fifties… [These stories] offered their readers assurance that Superman would remain forever an Eisenhower Republican, and the status would remain comfortably, quietly, permanently quo."[29]

Alexandre Franco da Sá refers to this identification of the perfect community with the idealized present as "uchronia": "As a result of positioning themselves at the final stage of the development of political institutions, our societies view the future as an indefinite continuation of what they already are."[30] Rather than utopia, Franco da Sá argues that this instead reflects "the impossibility of thinking in a utopian manner."[31] Conversely, Peter Fitting refers this sort of future as a "right-wing utopia"—specifically, a capitalist utopia, which provides "visions of an alternative society… for those whose ideals might be said to have already triumphed… [and] does not really criticize the United States."[32] The capitalistic nature of the 30th century was cemented in the Legion's origin story, published in *Superboy* #147 (1968). In this story, the three teenagers who would become Cosmic Boy, Saturn Girl, and Lightning Lad rescue industrialist R.J. Brande from an assassination attempt. Brande, a planet-building magnate akin to a futuristic Henry Ford, convinces the trio to form a team, telling them: "You should use your talents to combat crime and injustice. I'd like to bankroll an organization for the purpose… with you as charter members!"[33] This positive attitude toward capitalist wealth aligns the ideals of the mid-30th century with those of the early 20th. Written in the midst of the Cold War and the social movements of the 1960s, the Legion shows a future in which anything that could be considered complicated about the present has simply been forgotten. This future is typified by racial

homogeneity rather than racial discord, technologically-mediated economic abundance rather than social stratification, and worldwide unity rather than geopolitical conflict.

It is worth noting that a resistance to racial diversity is a key component of how this conservative future was presented. Marc Singer notes that "For nearly twenty years, the Legion's supposed racial diversity was mitigated—if not virtually negated—by the fact that, of all the races represented in the comic, only one group existed in real life: the white characters who comprised the bulk of the Legion."[34] Even after the introduction of a more diverse cast in later reboots, White characters remained a dominant majority. Though blue- and orange-skinned aliens appeared in the 1960s, no earthly people of color appeared in the pages of the *Legion of Super-Heroes* until the mid-1970s. Looking across multiple eras of the team, Jae Bryson notes that, by 2008, "Out of 128 Legionnaires… there have been nine black members. Seven percent."[35] According to Jim Shooter, editor Mort Weisinger forbade the creation of Black superheroes throughout the 1960s for fear that it would have a negative impact on DC's sales and distribution in the South.[36]

Despite its initial conservatism, the Legion's youthful creators of the 1960s and 70s pulled the comic book in a more progressive direction. Following Shooter, the next major *Legion* writer was Paul Levitz, who similarly began his DC career while still in high school.[37] Some stories explored the social problems of the 30th century, like one revealing that the father of Legionnaire Matter-Eater Lad is unemployed, alcoholic, and a gambling addict.[38] Hopeful idealism remained a factor, but rather than mid-century America, the new ideal for the Legion was the possibility of international cooperation represented by the United Nations. The connections between the United Planets of the 30th century and the United Nations of the 20th are nowhere so clear as in the tabloid-sized *All-New Collector's Edition* #C-55, in which the Legion

travels back to the 20th century to prevent the dissolution of the U.N. and a subsequent nuclear war.[39] Near the conclusion of Levitz's run on the *Legion of Super-Heroes*, a complex picture of the 30th century was presented in a pair of sourcebooks for the *DC Heroes* role-playing game, for which Levitz consulted. The second of these books gives a brief account of the process by which international and interplanetary cooperation came to rule:

> Over the past ten centuries, Earth has progressed from a balkanized world to a world united under a planetary government, headed by one elected president. As transportation became faster and more automatic and communications grew faster and more eff[i]cient, national boundaries grew to be of little importance except to the leaders who made them. Eventually, even the prestige and power of national leaders could no longer hold the world back from becoming a united world and Earth's first global government, Earthgov, was born.[40]

The world described in this sourcebook is a rationalistic, socialistic utopia: the government provides a basic income, health care, education, and housing for the everyone; society is essential classless, consisting of a leisure class and those who choose to work for personal reasons; a "WorldComp" selects qualified political candidates, who then run single-day political campaigns; and a police force of 100 people is sufficient for the entire planet's public safety.[41] By Levitz's time writing the *Legion,* the problems the Legion encounters typically involve interstallar intrigue. Though still subject to threats from space, life on Earth is largely perfected.

Though this peaceful world-system, with the teenage Legion as its guides, may seem purely secular, it has religious corollaries. The Book of Isaiah imagines an eschataological kingdom in which youth leads a worldly order that has moved beyond the strife of the past: "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the

fatling together, and a little child shall lead them" (Isa 11:6). The punishments that the *DC Heroes* sourcebooks describe for 30th-century criminals who prove incorrigible—permanent exile to the prison planets of Takron-Galtos or Labyrinth—suggest the "outer darkness" of Mt 22:13 or the "lake that burns with fire and sulfur" of Rev 21:8. (The Reboot Legion of the mid-1990s introduced a new prison planet, located at the heart of a star, that made this connection even more clear: it was called "Hell.")[42]

Teenage Rebllion in Mark Waid's *Legion*

Later incarnations of the Legion have shown greater skepticism about the perfectibility of earthly society, tying in with a broader trend in American comics that Mills describes as representing a "lingering distrust of American leaders."[43] This is most clear in the fairly dystopian future of the Giffen and the Bierbaums' "Five Years Later" era, but is also present in the "Threeboot" Legion (2004-2009), initially written by Mark Waid with art by Barry Kitson. This incarnation of the Legion began with a 13-issue arc that described a new kind of utopianism. The first issue opens with a piece of exposition that appears, in slightly different form, on the splash page of every issue of the new series' first year: "With the help of interstellar alliances, the Earth entered a millennium of utopian peace. Now, at the dawn of the 31st century, all we, our parents, and their parents have ever known is security, stability, and order. We're so sick of it, we could scream."[44] In this entirely new version of the 31st century, our heroes are not those who defend an interplanetary utopia, but rather its discontents. Waid and Kitson present this cultural struggle entirely in terms of intergenerational conflict between adults—conservative, safety-conscious, and square—and "underagers"—vibrant, rebellious, and surprisingly nostalgic.

The disconnection of the adult generation is illustrated in a conversation in the series' first issue between an officer of the Science Police and his commanding officer, General Toling4rd. The two converse on viewscreens, but as the scene progresses their dialogue balloons begin doubling and the frame shifts to reveal that, though their conversations is mediated through technology, they're in the same room with each other. By contrast, the Legion is shown to prefer more intimate, face-to-face interaction, as exemplified by the clubhouse headquarters in which they reside. The primary goal of the Legion's teenage rebellion is to disrupt the "Public Service"—a galaxy-wide surveillance network by which parents can not only track their teenagers but also suppress their use of superpowers and other genetic anomalies. Beyond opposing this surveillance system, the aims of the group are vague, though member Brainiac 5 makes it clear that his eventual goal is for the group to take over the responsibilities of the government.[45] More than a specific set of goals, the Legion represents an attitude of hopefulness and rebellion. The plaza surrounding the Legion's headquarters becomes a semipermanent encampment of young rebels—some superpowered, some not—who embrace the Legion's vision. In this plaza, one character notes, "underagers from across the galaxy have gathered to share ideas and experiences. Through socialization, they seem to have created an ergetic and fully functioning community of sorts."[46] This festival-like encampment resembles a "Temporary Autonomous Zone" (TAZ), described by poet and anarchist theorist Hakim Bey as "like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerrilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to reform elsewhere/elsewhen, before the State can crush it."[47]

The teenage Legion draws its primary inspiration from the comic books of the mid-20th century, as first evidenced by the presence of spinner racks bearing the DC logo depicted in their

headquarters.[48] Later, we learn that comics are a valuable commodity in this era when Legionnaires Cosmic Boy and Star Boy bribe their way past Princess Projectra's bodyguards with issues of *Superman* and *Mystery in Space.*[49] The theme of nostalgia and memory is further underscored by the chief adversary of the storyline, Praetor Lemnos, whose superpower is the ability to be forgotten—after he leaves a place, all beings forget his existence, and all record of his presence is erased from recording devices. The role of superhero comics takes on a new dimension in the series' 11th issue. Following the destruction of the Legion's headquarters by Lemnos and his supervillain team, Terror Firma, the encampment in Legion Plaza has been devastated. While most of the Legion's superpowered members set off to thwart an invasion of the U.P. worlds, the residents of the encampment must care for themselves. In an epilogue to this issue, we see the non-powered teenagers tending to the wounded, stepping on the remains of comic books amidst the debris of the headquarters. But the images shown on those comics mirror the actions they are taking: a nameless alien lifts a piece of rubble while two others carry a wounded humanoid, exactly mirroring the poses of Superman, Batman, and Robin on a torn comic book page nearby. One of the teenagers attempts to gather these comics from the rubble, and another attacks him for looting instead of helping (their battle, too, reflects images from comics). The collector defends his actions with an appeal to the power of superhero comics to inspire: "It wasn't just decoration. The comics and the artifacts and the old costumes and the… the… …they were important. They were the Legion's whole inspiration. Now it's lying in the dirt. All that stuff… it used to mean something."[50] The others convince him that he needs to help the living, rather than focusing on artifacts of the past. He ultimately agrees, declaring: "It's just comics." The final panel of the story (figure 14.1) reveals another mirrored pose: the collector adopts the stance of Green Lantern from the cover of *Flash* #222, where he breaks the fourth

wall with a direct appeal to the viewer: "C'mon, readers! I need your help!"[51] The message of this short story is clear: the ideals represented by superheroes are powerful, but ultimately meaningless unless those ideals are translated into action. Paul Lytle describes this story as symbolizing that "the Legion is leaving childhood behind for something much more important and difficult,"[52] but the mirroring of poses suggests that the difficult thing they are doing is—perhaps for the first time—embodying their ideals. It's not enough to simply naively read comics; one must take action to make a better world. Despite its melancholy tone, this story shows us utopianism in action, the transformation of ideal principles into practical actualities. This connection between fantasy and reality is emphasized even further by the revelation in the crossover series *Legion of Three Worlds* that Waid and Kitson's "Threeboot Legion" represents the 31st century of Earth-Prime—intended, in the DC multiverse, to represent *our* reality.[53] This incarnation of the Legion breaks the boundaries between inspiration and outcome, ideal and actuality, fantasy and reality.

<INSERT FIGURE 14.1 HERE>

In placing the idea of a better world within the context of a rebellious youth movement, Waid's version of the Legion shifts the inherent utopianism of the superhero team into a different category. Rather than utopia as a place, the Legion represents utopia as a community: something distributed throughout culture, and realizable in any time and place. Robert Nozick emphasizes the plurality of this kind of community-based utopia:

> there will not be *one* kind of community existing and one kind of life led in utopia. Utopia will consist of utopias, of many different and divergent communities in which people lead different kinds of lives under different institutions… Utopia is a framework for utopias, a place where people are at liberty to join together voluntarily to pursue and

> attempt to realize their own vision of the good life in the ideal community but where no one can *impose* his own utopian vision upon others.[54]

Utopianism need not consist in the elaboration of a specific idea, but rather in the *entertaining* of ideas about a better world. This plurality of attitudes and ideas about the ideal future is represented in both the Threeboot and Rebirth incarnations of the Legion. In the Waid-Kitson story, Legionnaire Triplicate Girl describes the Legion as "fragmented in ideology and purpose."[55] More recently, in a two-part story illustrated by multiple artists, writer Brian Michael Bendis presents the origin stories of several of the Rebirth Legion's members, revealing a range of attitudes toward the United Planets (in this continuity, an organization founded by Superboy in the early 21st century). Dawnstar and Bouncing Boy are openly hostile to the U.P.'s leaders and representatives, while Wildfire and Timber Wolf are enthusiastic supporters.[56] And yet the Legion is able to incorporate this range of ideas and still work together for the common purpose of ensuring that the U.P. lives up to its ideals. This multiplicity of attitudes embodies an increasing trend in utopianism, as Frederic Jameson elaborates: "Utopia is no longer the invention and defense of a specific floorplan, but rather the story of all the arguments about how Utopia should be constructed in the first place. It is no longer the exhibit of an achieved Utopian construct, but rather the story of its production and of the very process of construction as such."[57] Utopia is not a place, but a process. And, as Darko Suvin notes, the communication of the utopian ideal in a literary or artistic creation is a key component of this process: "Literary utopia—and every description of utopia is literary—is a heuristic device for perfectibility, an epistemological and not an ontological entity… If utopia is, then, philosophically, a method rather than a state, it cannot be realized or not realized—it can only be applied."[58] And that application comes about through an act of reading, a collaboration between text and reader—

much like the embodied superheroic poses of the non-powered Legionnaires cleaning the debris from Legion Plaza in *Legion of Super-Heroes* #11. Ramzi Fawaz—speaking specifically of the Justice League of America but with a principle equally applicable to the Legion of Super-Heroes—ties the role of imagination in utopianism directly to the optimism of superhero teams: "The egalitarian image of the superhero team as an intergalactic peacekeeping force provided readers with a popular fantasy for imagining alternative social and political responses to the cold war, including international cooperation and cross-cultural alliance, rather than unilateral military power."[59] Superheroes became "a generative site for imagining democracy in its most radical form, as a universally expansive ethical responsibility for the well-being of the world rather than an institutional structure upholding national citizenship."[60] This utopianism became central in the superhero comics of the 1960s-70s—the period in authors like Shooter and Levitz refined and redirected the more conservative future of the early Legion stories.

Youth Revolt, Naivety, and the Kingdom of Heaven

The key element that makes the Legion of Super-Heroes unique among the superhero stories of the 1960s is the team's status as teenagers. Set against the backdrop of an idealized future world, these youthful characters embody a naïve hopefulness, whether presented as the "squeaky clean" attitude criticized by Conway or the more worldly idealism of Levitz's later stories. This 30th century is typified as a world that puts forth its youth as the embodiment of its ideals, and this reflects a connection between this comic-book utopia and the sort of perfected world imagined in prophetic literature. In both the Legion and Isaiah, "a little child shall lead them" (Isa 11:6).

The Legion's future connects to Jesus' presentation of the Kingdom of Heaven in the Synoptic Gospels—the kingdom which is, according to Lk 17:21, "among you." This diffused Kingdom need not represent a specific place or time, but rather an attitude, a willingness to be led by "a little child." As Mary Ann Beavis notes, "for Jesus, the kingdom of God was not a hoped-for restoration of political independence to the Jewish nation but an evocation of the myth of God as king. As such, the kingdom was preexistent, since God had ruled the world since its creation; it was a present reality, since God's kingship was eternal; it would be manifested perfectly in the future, as the prophets had foretold."[61] Because it represents an idea, the Kingdom is and can be ever-present in human history. Donald Kraybill emphasizes the importance of manifesting the Kingdom of Heaven in the here-and-now, arguing that placing the kingdom in some vague future "dilutes serious interest in applying the teachings of Jesus to our lives today."[62] Focusing on the present possibility of the manifest kingdom unlocks creative possibilities for reimagining our society, as Tillich elaborates: "It is this militant kingdom of God in history that cannot generate illusion because it does not promise a utopian finality to any 'place' in history but makes itself known again and again in ever new realizations, so that the truth of utopia is always borne out."[63] And the truth of utopia, as Verna Ehret argues, is a form of hope, and more specifically, hope in the form of a relationship: "A hope for the future of humanity, who we might be as individuals and, more importantly, in relation to each other. We are at our best selves when we seek continually to improve our relations with each other rather than assuming we have achieved them. The utopian vision here is not a goal to be achieved but a path to be walked."[64] Trust in our fellow sentient beings, and hope for improved relationships with them, are the core of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Writing in the early 1970s, Umberto Eco described the atmosphere of *Superman* comics as an "oneiric climate" wherein the boundaries between past and future are unclear. Stories begin and end at the same point because "If [a new story] took Superman up again at the point where he left off, he would have taken a step toward death."[65] Eco notes that this results in a world that *cannot* change for the better: "The plot must be static and must evade any development, because Superman *must* make virtue consist of many little activities on a small scale, never achieving a total awareness."[66] Mark Smylie—writing decades later, in an era where growing continuity, rather than a more pure narrative redundance, is the norm—notes that the same issue nevertheless persists:

> Just as the superhero is incapable of dying (and thus taking what could be considered just the first crucial step in the monomythic hero journey, as well as its inevitable last), the superhero is in some ways doomed to fail, as the world of the superhero will always be filled with crime and supervillainy. The superhero genre, like the soap opera, is an unending genre, a serial story that always ends in the same cliffhanger. There is no way for the superhero to achieve some great restoration of a broken world, only gain some small tactical victories in an unending chain of violence and predation. *Gotham will always be Gotham*.[67]

In other words, Smylie and Eco argue that a superhero universe is, or must be, *imperfectible*. Even the utopian Legion reflects this: after all, were their society truly perfect, their narrative would be static. A perfect world would have no villainous threats for them to confront. But this assumes that utopianism requires some kind of objective perfection as a static endpoint. Instead, the plural, distributed utopia—be it the secular society envisioned by Nozick or the Kingdom as described by Tillich—is not a place but a process, an attitude, a spirit, a hope.

Seen against the backdrop of human history, that kind of hope for a better world can appear naïve. But in the stories of the Legion, naivety becomes a positive value. The current incarnation of the *Legion of Super-Heroes*, written by Brian Michael Bendis with art by Ryan Sook, removes the pejorative sense from the childlike simplicity of hope. In this incarnation of the Legion, the Superboy who inspires the formation of the Legion is not the young Superman but rather his son, Jonathan Kent. Following an epic battle against the interstellar warlord Rogol Zaar, the galaxy has been brought to the brink of war, with armies from multiple planets gathered and ready to fight. The teenage Kent averts disaster by proposing an interplanetary alliance modeled after the United Nations. The generals and warriors of the planets are skeptical of the plan, until the members of the Legion of Super-Heroes arrive to observe the momentous moment of the United Planets' founding. Ironically, they arrive too early—but it is their appearance that demonstrates to the assembled species that the U.P. can work.[68] In the Rebirth Legion, Jon Kent's reaction to the conflict he has witnessed is simple, but it marks the foundation of a new society, as Saturn Girl makes clear: "In the face of all that Rogol did, the child's direct and only response was—galactic peace."[69] This may be the naïve optimism of an adolescent, but the clarity and simplicity of a childlike hope can be transformative. Perhaps it is this naïve hope that Jesus speaks of in Mt 18:3: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." As Donald Kraybill notes, children have not yet learned to abuse power or to judge others for their differences: "[Jesus] tells us to become infants who overlook status differences, seeing *all* others as equally significant despite their social rank and function."[70] The Legion of Super-Heroes represents this kind of simple, adolescent hope for a better, egalitarian world, and a teenage rebellion against injustice—and these things are the foundation of the Kingdom.

[1] Adventure Architects, *Legion of Super-Heroes, Volume II: The World Book*, ed. Jeff R. Leason, DC Heroes Role-Playing Reference (Niles, IL: Mayfair Games, 1987), 24–26.
[2] Otto Binder and Al Plastino, "The Legion of Super-Heroes," *Adventure Comics*, no. 247 (April 1958), https://www.comics.org/issue/14358/.
[3] Glen Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography* (Hoboken, N.J: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 105–12; Michael Eury, ed., *The Krypton Companion: A Historical Exploration of Superman Comic Books of 1958-1986* (Raleigh, N.C: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2006), 6.
[4] See, for example, Geoff Johns, George Pérez, and Scott Koblish, "Legion of 3 Worlds, Book One," *Final Crisis: Legion of Three Worlds*, no. 1 (October 2008): 27, https://www.comics.org/issue/535233/.
[5] Thomas Steven Molnar, *Utopia: The Perennial Heresy* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America/The Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1990), 5.
[6] Paul Tillich, "The Political Meaning of Utopia," in *Political Expectation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 179.
[7] John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 283.
[8] Lyman Tower Sargent, *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 99, https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780199573400.001.0001.
[9] Diana Fritz Cates, "Hope, Hatred, and the Ambiguities of Utopic Longing," in *Hope and the Longing for Utopia: Futures and Illusions in Theology and Narrative*, ed. Daniel Boscaljon (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2014), 25, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1cgf5h7 (emphasis original).
[10] Cates, 27.
[11] Bronwen Neil, "Curating the Past: The Retrieval of Historical Memories and Utopian Ideals," in *Memories of Utopia: The Revision of Histories and Landscapes in Late Antiquity*, ed. Bronwen Neil and Kosta Simić, Routledge Monographs in Classical Studies (Abingdon, Oxon & New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 4, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429448508.
[12] The following overview of the Legion's publishing history is indebted to Michael Kooiman, "Legion of Super-Heroes," Cosmic Teams, 1996-2022, https://www.cosmicteams.com/legion/; Glen Cadigan, *Legion Companion* (Raleigh, N.C.: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2003); and Timothy Callahan, ed., *Teenagers from the Future: Essays on the Legion of Super-Heroes* (Edwardsville, Ill.: Sequart Research & Literacy Organization, 2008).
[13] Julian Darius, "Revisionism, Radical Experimentation, and Dystopia in Keith Giffen's Legion," in *Teenagers from the Future: Essays on the Legion of Super-Heroes*, ed. Timothy Callahan (Edwardsville, Ill.: Sequart Research & Literacy Organization, 2008), 175n1.
[14] Cadigan, *Legion Companion*, 137.
[15] Cadigan, 50.
[16] See Cadigan, 50–60; Jeff Barbanell, "Shooter's Marvelesque," in *Teenagers from the Future: Essays on the Legion of Super-Heroes*, ed. Timothy Callahan (Edwardsville, Ill.: Sequart Research & Literacy Organization, 2008), 63–83.
[17] Cadigan, *Legion Companion*, 56.
[18] Cadigan, 56.
[19] Jim Shooter, Curt Swan, and George Klein, "The Doomed Legionnaire," *Adventure Comics*, no. 353 (February 1967), https://www.comics.org/issue/20709/.
[20] A thorough analysis of Giffen's tenure on the title is given in Darius, "Revisionism, Radical Experimentation, and Dystopia in Keith Giffen's Legion."
[21] Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1979), 62.
[22] Holly White, "Desiring Utopian Subjects: Collectivity and Its Discontents," in *Hope and the Longing for Utopia: Futures and Illusions in Theology and Narrative*, ed. Daniel Boscaljon (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2014), 62, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1cgf5h7.
[23] Binder and Plastino, "The Legion of Super-Heroes," 4.
[24] Ian Gordon, "Nostalgia, Myth, and Ideology: Visions of Superman at the End of the 'American Century,'" in *Comics & Ideology*, ed. Matthew P. McAllister, Edward H. Sewell, and Ian Gordon, Popular Culture & Everyday Life, v. 2 (New York: P. Lang, 2001), 192.
[25] Sara K. Ellis, "Decades Ahead of Us to Get It Right: Architecture and Utopia," in *Teenagers from the Future: Essays on the Legion of Super-Heroes*, ed. Timothy Callahan (Edwardsville, Ill.: Sequart Research & Literacy Organization, 2008), 114.
[26] Anthony Mills, *American Theology, Superhero Comics, and Cinema: The Marvel of Stan Lee and the Revolution of a Genre*, Routledge Studies in Religion and Film (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 40.

[27] Max J. Skidmore and Joey Skidmore, "More than Mere Fantasy: Political Themes in Contemporary Comic Books," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 17, no. 1 (Summer 1983): 84, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3840.1983.1701_83.x.
[28] Mills, *American Theology, Superhero Comics, and Cinema*, 121–22.
[29] Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, 127.
[30] Alexandre Franco de Sá, "From Modern Utopias to Contemporary Uchronia," in *Existential Utopia: New Perspectives on Utopian Thought*, ed. Patrícia Vieria and Michael Marder (New York: Continuum, 2012), 33, https://doi.org/10.5040/9781501301421.
[31] Franco de Sá, 33.
[32] Peter Fitting, "Utopias beyond Our Ideals: The Dilemma of the Right-Wing Utopia," *Utopian Studies* 2, no. 1/2 (1991): 105, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20719029.
[33] E. Nelson Bridwell and Pete Costanza, "The Origin of the Legion!," *Superboy*, no. 147 (June 1968): 5, https://www.comics.org/issue/21920/#156347.
[34] Marc Singer, "'Black Skins' and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race," *African American Review* 36, no. 1 (2002): 110, https://doi.org/10.2307/2903369. The first Black Legionnaire, Tyroc, was introduced in 1976.
[35] Jae Bryson, "The Racial Politics of the Legion," in *Teenagers from the Future: Essays on the Legion of Super-Heroes*, ed. Timothy Callahan (Edwardsville, Ill.: Sequart Research & Literacy Organization, 2008), 315.
[36] Cadigan, *Legion Companion*, 53 ; Compare creator Phil Jimenez's recent report that DC's editors asked him to make his LGBTQ-themed *Superwoman* series "appeal more to Trump voters" (Phil Jimenez, "Ah, #Superwoman," *Instagram*, February 22, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CLmQXGjBLE1/).
[37] Cadigan, *Legion Companion*, 107–8.
[38] Jim Shooter and Win Mortimer, "The Hapless Hero!," *Action Comics*, no. 381 (October 1969), https://www.comics.org/issue/22999/#161406.
[39] Paul Levitz, Mike Grell, and Vince Colletta, "The Millennium Massacre," *All-New Collector's Edition*, no. C–55 (March 1978), https://www.comics.org/issue/68930/.
[40] Adventure Architects, *Legion of Super-Heroes, Volume II: The World Book*, 24.
[41] Adventure Architects, 24–31.
[42] Tom Peyer, Jeffrey Moy, and W.C. Carani, "Enter the Workforce!," *Legionnaires*, no. 21 (January 1995): 11, https://www.comics.org/issue/65807/.
[43] Mills, *American Theology, Superhero Comics, and Cinema*, 100.
[44] Mark Waid, Barry Kitson, and Mick Gray, "And We Are Legion," *Legion of Super-Heroes (Vol. 5)*, no. 1 (February 2005): 4, https://www.comics.org/issue/214031.
[45] Mark Waid et al., "Tomorrow's Heroes Today!," *Legion of Super-Heroes (Vol. 5)*, no. 2 (March 2005): 14, https://www.comics.org/issue/230478/.
[46] Mark Waid, Barry Kitson, and Art Thibert, "Livin' Fast... Dyin' Young!," *Legion of Super-Heroes (Vol. 5)*, no. 5 (June 2005): 1, https://www.comics.org/issue/235037/.
[47] Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (The Anarchist Library, 1985), 80, https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/hakim-bey-t-a-z-the-temporary-autonomous-zone-ontological-anarchy-poetic-terrorism.
[48] Waid, Kitson, and Gray, "And We Are Legion," 15.
[49] Mark Waid, Barry Kitson, and Art Thibert, "Meet the... Legion of Super-Heroes," *Legion of Super-Heroes (Vol. 5)*, no. 6 (July 2005): 2, https://www.comics.org/issue/235038/#409934.
[50] Mark Waid, Dale Eaglesham, and Art Thibert, "Elseworld in Legion Plaza," *Legion of Super-Heroes (Vol. 5)*, no. 11 (December 2005): 27, https://www.comics.org/issue/271436/#448795.
[51] Waid, Eaglesham, and Thibert, 30.
[52] Paul Lytle, "A Universe in Adolescence," in *Teenagers from the Future: Essays on the Legion of Super-Heroes*, ed. Timothy Callahan (Edwardsville, Ill.: Sequart Research & Literacy Organization, 2008), 304.
[53] Geoff Johns, George Pérez, and Scott Koblish, "Legion of 3 Worlds, Book Five," *Final Crisis: Legion of Three Worlds*, no. 5 (September 2009): 24–25, https://www.comics.org/issue/535237/.
[54] Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 311–12.
[55] Mark Waid, Barry Kitson, and Art Thibert, "It's a Magic Number!," *Legion of Super-Heroes (Vol. 5)*, no. 3 (April 2005): 30, https://www.comics.org/issue/230479/.
[56] Brian Michael Bendis et al., "The Trial of the Legion of Super-Heroes, Part 2," *Legion of Super-Heroes* 8, no. 9 (November 2020), https://www.comics.org/issue/2150749/.
[57] Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London & New York: Verso, 2005), 217; see also David Hyman, *Revision and the Superhero Genre*, Palgrave Studies in

Comics and Graphic Novels (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 78–79, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64759-3.
[58] Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 52.
[59] Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics*, Postmillennial Pop (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 5, http://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479814336.001.0001.
[60] Fawaz, 7.
[61] Mary Ann Beavis, *Jesus & Utopia: Looking for the Kingdom of God in the Roman World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 98–99.
[62] Donald B. Kraybill, *The Upside-down Kingdom*, Revised ed., Christian Peace Shelf Selection (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1990), 27.
[63] Tillich, "The Political Meaning of Utopia," 179.
[64] Verna Ehret, "Utopia and Narrative: Theology between the Boundaries of Overhumanization and Hypertheism," in *Hope and the Longing for Utopia: Futures and Illusions in Theology and Narrative*, ed. Daniel Boscaljon (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2014), 17, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1cgf5h7.
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[66] Eco, 164.
[67] Mark Smylie, "Religion and Artesia/Religion in Artesia," in *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels*, ed. A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer (New York: Continuum, 2010), 295 (emphasis original).
[68] Brian Michael Bendis et al., "The Unity Saga: The House of El: The Conclusion: Part Two," *Superman* 5, no. 15 (November 2019): 5–9, https://www.comics.org/issue/2016017/.
[69] Brian Michael Bendis, Ryan Sook, and Wade von Grawbadger, "Will Superboy's Past... Destroy the Future?," *Legion of Super-Heroes* 8, no. 12 (March 2021): 3, https://www.comics.org/issue/2186102/.
[70] Kraybill, *The Upside-down Kingdom*, 242 (emphasis original).

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Figure 14.1. Reality begins to mirror superhero comics in Legion of Super-Heroes #11. From Waid, Eaglesham, and Thibert 2005, p. 30.