Danielle Raffaele
Robert A Dallen Prize

Topic: A study of the influence of the Bible on the two contemporary science fiction films, *The Matrix* and *Avatar*, with a focus on the link between religion, myth and plot.

The two films *The Matrix* (1999, the Wachowski brothers) and *Avatar* (2009, James Cameron)[1] belong to the science fiction genre[2] of the contemporary film world and each evoke a diverse set of religiosity and myth within their respective plots. The two films are rich with both overt and subvert religious imagery of motifs and symbolism which one can interpret as belonging to many diverse streams of religious thought and practice across the globe.[3] For the purpose of this essay I will be focussing specifically on one religious mode of thought being a Judeo-Christian look at the role of the Messiah and its relation to the hero myth. I will develop this by exploring the archetype of the hero with the two different roles of the biblical Messiah (one being conqueror, and the other of

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[1] In this essay I presume the reader is familiar with the two films as I do not provide an extensive synopsis or summary of them. I recommend going to the Internet Movie Database (http://imdb.com) and searching for 'The Matrix' and 'Avatar' for a generous reading of the two plots.

[2] Science fiction as a genre will not be discussed in this essay but a definition that struck me as useful for the purpose here is, "My own definition is that science fiction is literature about something that hasn't happened yet, but might be possible some day. That it might be possible is the important part; that's what separates science fiction from fantasy… The appeal of science fiction… is that is about things that might be possible." p.207, William Sleator (1996), 'What *is* it about Science Fiction?' pp.206-212, *Only Connect: Readings on Children's Literature,* edited by Shelia Egoff, Gordon Stubbs, Ralph Ashley, and Wendy Sutton, Oxford University Press, Ontario. Another useful quote to do with the film world is: "Science fiction motion pictures have always connected themselves with the nature of life and reality, portraying scientists of technology as either going amok or playing God, with the difference not always easily discernible. But it was when science fiction itself started exploring the political, social and moral issues… that the film industry started changing. This has resulted in over half of the top grossing films to date being from the science fiction genre, dealing with global technological fears, alternative futures and the nature of reality itself. All three of these themes are running through *The Matrix*, but with a spiritual undertone running through them." Pp.92-93, Jeremy Punt (2004), 'Biblical Allusion in *The Matrix*: Messiah and Violence', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, pp.90-107, vol. 119.

[3] Both films continually present the notion of reality, dreaming, illusion and consciousness throughout their plots which can be explored through a Buddhist reading. Further Gnosticism, Hinduism and Paganism are also perspectives that the films can be seen through. See articles about *Avatar* and *The Matrix* in my bibliography from *Journal of Religion and Film*, and Glen Yeffeth, editor (2003), *Taking the Red Pill: Science, Philosophy and Religion in The Matrix*, Penguin Books, Australia.

sacrifice and re-birth) and this likening to the two films' depicted protagonists, Neo and

Jake Sully. I will develop this with an examination of the connection between the

hero/messiah figure and the monotheistic deity Yahweh/God,[4] and conclude with how the

place of God plays a vital role in the outcome of each plot.

Religion[5] and myth are closely interconnected for they both imply a belief in

something. Myth is more generally related to a belief that is untrue or whimsical, whereas

religion can be likened to a more complex belief system that continues to be held true in

our modern day.[6] The term 'myth' I will be using, however, will relate directly to the

mythic narratives of the hero found in the stories presented in the writings of the Jewish

and Christian religion. The hero myth often explores the story of an unlikely individual[7]

who rises to greatness in a time of great need and restores goodness and order amongst a

people. This heroic tale is suggestively universal according to Leeming and Campbell,

but also corresponds quite closely to the Abrahamic hero traditions I am exploring here:

> … As Joseph Campbell has so clearly demonstrated, when we consider
> these heroes and their myths comparatively, we discover a universal hero myth
> that speaks to us all and addresses our common need to move forward as
> individuals and as a species. "The Hero," writes Campbell, "is the man or
> woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical
> limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms" (Hero, 19–20). The

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[4] Please note there are numerous readings of *The Matrix* from a Christian lens but I unfortunately cannot cover all of them in this essay simply because of the word limit. A closer reading will allude to biblical characters and imagery other than the Messiah, namely John the Baptist, Mary Magdalene, The Virgin Mary, Judas, Satan, the Apocalypse, Lazarus, Nebuchadnezzar and so on. For a closer reading I again recommend any of the articles in my bibliography from the *Journal of Religion and Film*.

[5] It seems best to begin with a definition of the terms 'religion' and 'myth'. The definition of religion is a controversial one that is subject to many a debate,[5] but for the discussion at hand the definition from the online Oxford Dictionary fits best: "noun 1, the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods. 2, a particular system of faith and worship. 3, a pursuit or interest followed with devotion."[5] www.askoxford.com This will be the understanding of religion to bear in mind when exploring the religion presented in these two films.

[6] David Adams Leeming (2002), *Myth: a Biography of Belief*, Oxford University Press, London and New York, p.8.

[7] "…the Messianic Figure: a formula in which the central character is a non-conformist or unlikely redeemer who transforms lives and ultimately undergoes martyrdom" Matthew McEver (1998), 'The Messianic Figure in Film', *Journal of Religion and Film*, 2:2.

essential characteristic of this archetype is the giving of life to something bigger than itself. By definition, the true hero does not merely stand for the status quo; he or she breaks new ground.[8]

The hero is a figure of many epics and mythologies across the spectrum of our history and culture, such as Hercules or Superman to name a few, and it cannot be denied that a very prominent place for the hero is held within the concept of the Messiah in both the Jewish and Christian traditions. The Jewish concept of the Messiah is an earth-bound military leader sent to liberate God's followers from exile and to restore their rightful place in Zion under the Law.[9] The Christian understanding of the Messiah, being Jesus (Yeshua), is firstly one of self-sacrifice and re-birth and secondly a saving warrior and redeemer engaged in an ongoing spiritual battle for the souls of humankind until the end times of the apocalypse and the entrance into the kingdom of God.[10] The prophecy and description of the Messiah found in the biblical books of *Isaiah* and *Daniel* is an ambiguous one and plays two very different roles in each respective tradition; the books refer to a man who will be both a conqueror[11] and a suffering servant.[12] The Messiah

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[8]Leeming, *Myth*, pp.7-8,117-118, and Joseph Campbell (1972), *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp.19-20. First published 1949.

[9] The end of Second Temple Judaism (70 CE), "… provides the socio-historical context for much of the New Testament, the destruction of the temple and the loss of the Davidic monarchy saw the development of forms of messianism, 'the history of speculations about a royal or priestly leader chosen by God', although version of the expectation of a Messiah were neither uniform nor common to all Jewish groups… The Zealots, Sicarii and other disaffected groups held the notion of a charismatic, military leader, who could, with the help of God and with (or as) as messiah-figure, overcome the occupying [Roman] forces and inaugurate a theocratic nation faithful to the Law… God's followers were to join an earthly army to get rid of the oppressors of Israel and restore its purity before God, since he was viewed as a warrior who would assist his followers to destroy his (their) enemies." Punt, Jeremy (2004), 'Biblical Allusion in *The Matrix*: Messiah and Violence', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, pp.90-107, vol. 119. Pp.101-102.

[10] Punt, *Messiah and Violence*, pp.103,106.

[11] Isaiah 61. All biblical and scriptural quotations are taken from *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible With The Apocrypha: King James Version*, Cambridge University Press, U.K. 2005.

[12] Isaiah 53. The difference understandings of the two messiahs spurn from the context of Second Temple Judaism CE where the figure of Jesus as a Messiah is confusing to the people from ancient Israel because no one was expecting a suffering spiritual leader to be their Messiah, for he did nothing to further the land's sovereignty back to God's chosen people. Paul Fontana (2003) "Finding God in The Matrix" by pp.183-213, *Taking the Red Pill: Science, Philosophy and Religion in The Matrix*, ed. Glen Yeffeth, Penguin Books Australia, p.186.

('anointed one' in Hebrew), according to both traditions, is an awaited redeemer who will ultimately save and restore God's people, and regardless of the difference in thought and tradition, each figure is a liberator and a freedom fighter on the side of humanity, expelling the oppressive forces of wrongful powers and evil. The protagonists of *The Matrix* and *Avatar*, Neo and Jake Sully, both possess these messianic qualities and are both pre-destined by God (through the Oracle for Neo and via Eywa for Jake) in the plot to liberate their people, whether it be the human race for Neo or the Na'vi people for Jake. These two protagonists can be said to allude more closely to the military Messiah that was expected at the times of ancient Israel, yet both also possess the notion of self-sacrifice and re-birth that is commonly associated with Jesus. This further links to the archetype of the mythological hero stated by Leeming, as one that breaks new ground and gives up his life for something bigger than himself, which the two heroes do. I will further explore this hero role momentarily.

The first indication that Neo is a messianic figure is subtly announced by a man who arrives at his apartment to collect some illegal software: "Hallelujah! You're my saviour, man. My own personal Jesus Christ!" This statement can be seen as a predecessor to when Morpheus, who was prophesised by the Oracle to find the One, explains to Neo that he is the One who must save humanity from the clutches of the machines, in the prison of their own minds plugged into the Matrix.[13] Another subtle

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[13] The Matrix is the virtual reality "dreamworld" which is used as a distraction for human beings while their bodies in the real world are used as battery power for the A.I. The Matrix is what Neo is unplugged from initially; he then awakes in the real world and is given the role of saviour. Only a small number of humans who have been unplugged, known as the rebels, live in the real world in a community called Zion close to the earth's core. Zion alludes to the biblical place of the same name, one interpretation of that being the restored Israel under the awaited Messiah (Isaiah 51:16). The Rebels can also be closely linked to the Zionists who support the movement. For a contemporary reading on the messianic motif in Jewish and Zionist thought refer to Aviezer Ravitzky's *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Radicalism* (1993) The University of Chicago Press, USA and London.

reference of Neo's messianic status can be found onboard the Nebuchadnezzar ship

where a plaque states "MARK III No. 11" which alludes to the biblical reference in the

book of Mark 3:11 that states "… You are the Son of God!" which directly indicates

Neo's status as the One.[14] Likewise in *Avatar* Jake's role of the hero/Messiah can be

foreshadowed when a Seed of Eywa[15] rests on Neytiri's arrow indicating her to stop just

before she releases it from her bow to kill him.[16] The Seeds of Eywa return again when

Neytiri tries to stop him from following her to Hometree.[17] This time they come in

multiplicity and cover Jake's torso, illuminating him. This can be alluded to the

announcement of the Son of God in the biblical book of *Matthew*, "And Jesus, when he

was baptised, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened

unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him:

And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well

pleased."[18] This foreshadows his greatness in Eywa's plan; Neytiri is amazed by the sight

and allows him to accompany her home. It is important to note here that many important

figures in the Bible are 'called' by God, whether directly or indirectly, for specific

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[14] Mark D. Stucky (2005), 'He is the One: The Matrix Trilogy's Postmodern Movie Messiah,' *Journal of Religion and Film,* 9:2. This biblical allusion can further be developed with Neo's 'real' name being Thomas A. Anderson. Stucky explores this by suggesting: "…Thomas was famous as the doubting disciple who would not believe in the resurrected Jesus until he felt the nail wounds himself. Thomas Anderson starts out as a very reluctant member of Morpheus's crew, and his doubts about his alleged identity as the One continue until nearly the end of the movie. 'Anderson' translated from its Greek roots means "son of man," the term favoured by Jesus to describe himself. But Thomas Anderson takes on the name "Neo," which is an anagram of "One."

[15] Eywa is the deity of Pandora. The seed resembles a floating jellyfish-like plant

[16] Or more correctly to kill his avatar. Like Neo in some respects, Jake too is 'plugged', however it is not into a computer-generated reality like the Matrix. He is in the same reality but as a different body, as an avatar resembling the Na'vi people on the planet Pandora. His human body is hardwired and resting in a coffin-like bed in the science laboratory built on Pandora.

[17] The Na'vi home community of the Omaticaya clan. Avatars are prohibited from going to it.

[18] Matthew 3:16-17

instructions on what he must do to fulfil God's plan.[19] Although Eywa did not directly

speak to Jake, Neytiri understood the message and its significance, which is further

empathised when she explains to her parents, the clan leaders, why she brought him to

Hometree: "There has been a sign". Similarly with Neo, the Oracle did not directly tell

Neo he was or was not the One, but told Morpheus he would find the One and Trinity

that she would fall in love with the One; through these charatcers, the Oracle and Neytiri,

God/Eywa spoke the message of the Messiah and within this revelation their 'Oneness'

became real. I will return to the point of how God is alluded to and plays a very

prominent role in the two films momentarily.

As stated before, the hero is an individual who rises to greatness in a time of great

need, restoring goodness and order amongst a people; the hero gives up his life to

something bigger than himself and ultimately breaks new ground. The heroic myth can be

found in both films as each begins in a time of turmoil and in need of a saviour figure.

After Morpheus explains the rise of the machine and the enslavement of humanity, he re-

tells Neo the origin of the Rebels and the prophesy of the Oracle concerning the coming

of the One:

> When the Matrix was first built, there was a man born inside who had the ability
> to change whatever he wanted, to remake the Matrix as he saw fit. It was he who
> freed the first of us, taught us the truth: 'As long as the matrix exists the human
> race will never be free.' After he died the Oracle prophesised his return and that
> his coming would hail the destruction of the Matrix, end the war, bring freedom
> to our people.

This foretells the need for Neo as a redeemer, and he ultimately fulfils this prophecy

when he saves Morpheus from the Agents in the Matrix. By dodging their bullets he

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[19] Fontana, 'Finding God in *The Matrix*,' p.186-187. Such examples include Abraham's calling to go out into the land of Canaan (Genesis 12), or more generally in Islam, Muhammad's recitation of God's message through the angel Gabriel.

begins to transform into a more powerful fighter and gains the understanding of his

purpose as the saviour. This is further empathised when Trinity says "How did you do

that?... You moved like they [the Agents] do. I've never seen anyone move that fast."

Similarly the Na'vi people hold the legend of the Taruk Makto.[20] Neytiri explains to

Jake:

> My grandfather's grandfather was Taruk Makto, Rider of Last Shadow… Taruk
> chose him. It has only happened five times since the Time of the First Songs…
> Taruk Makto was mighty. He brought the clans together in a time of great
> sorrow. All Na'vi people know the story.

Indeed the Na'vi people soon find themselves in a 'time of great sorrow' after the 'Sky

People' (being the humans) destroy The Tree of Voices[21] and Hometree for a large

amount of the Unobtainium stone that sells for 20 million dollars a kilo on Earth. Jake, to

redeem himself in the eyes of the people after admitting he knew all along that this was

the human's detrimental plan, seeks out and successfully rides Taruk, becomes the clan

leader and unites all the Na'vi people in a battle against the Sky People to protect their

land and sacred sites from further destruction. They win the battle and end with the

restoration of the hero's fulfilled role; Jake concludes: "The aliens went back to their

dying world. Only a few were chosen to stay. The time of great sorrow was ending,

Taruk Makto was no longer needed." This sense restoration as a motif in the hero myth

can also be found in the closing lines of *The Matrix* after Neo saves Morpheus and has

won the battle against the Agents. He leaves the Machines a message of warning, having

fully embodied the persona of the One:

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[20] Translating as 'rider of the Last Shadow', Taruk is a fierce eagle-like tetradactyl who is also greatly
feared as a predator. The Makto is the Na'vi person who can successfully ride the creature and in doing
thus becomes a clan leader.
[21] A spiritual tree holding all the voices of the ancestors that connects directly to Eywa, and is a place,
stated by Neytiri, "where prayers are heard and sometimes answered."

> I know you're out there. I can feel you now. I know that you're afraid... you're afraid of us. You're afraid of change. I don't know the future. I didn't come here to tell you how this is going to end. I came here to tell you how it's going to begin. I'm going to hang up this phone, and then I'm going to show these people what you don't want them to see. I'm going to show them a world without you. A world without rules and controls, without borders or boundaries. A world where anything is possible. Where we go from there is a choice I leave to you.

Both Neo and Jake fulfil the role of the mythic hero as a figure who goes beyond their personal limitations and breaks new ground. As we have seen they are also very closely connected to the role of the biblical Messiah,[22] both as a military leader who restores Israel back into the ownership of God's people,[23] (with Neo's conquering of the Agents and Jake's winning battle over the Sky People) and as the figure self-sacrifice and re-birth.

The sacrifice and re-birth allusions can be found in *The Matrix* when Neo is gunned-down and killed by the Agents' bullets and then, moments later, arises, re-born, with a perfected body, glowing (symbolic of a glorified Christ with a halo), and with the absence of bullet holes.[24] Jake too is re-born when he rejects his old, disabled human body[25] by brining it to the Tree of Souls; his spirit leaves his human form, dies, "passes through the eye of Eywa" and, by Eywa's power, returns to his avatar's body. It is no coincidence that Jake calls this ceremony his "birthday" as his final words in the film. Both Neo and Jake posses strong biblical imagery for, like the Christian Messiah, they

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[22] Punt's quote here fits nicely: "The Messiah plays a facilitating role in both calling upon people to break with the living lie as well as showing, and in this way, inaugurating, a different world and a different life- two elements typical of Messianism in at least the history of Christianity. The expected leader will be the saviour for all, and is presumed to be among those 'asleep', that is, a saviour from among the people." *Messiah and Violence,* p.94

[23] Fontana, 'Finding God in *The Matrix*,' p.185

[24] Jeffery Wittung and Daniel Bramer (2006), 'From Superman to Brahman: The Religious Shift of *The Matrix* Mythology', *Journal of Religion and Film*, 10:2, and Stucky, 'He is the One'.

[25] He is in a wheelchair and cannot use his legs after he broke his spine in a war battle on earth.

emerge re-born with a new and powerful body, awakening to a new life with vision and purpose.[26]

God's role in the two films is essential to the rise of the hero/messiah figure and the outcome of each plot. God's presence in *The Matrix* exists as a subvert but vital one where He can be found in the most essential and crucial places for the continuation of the plot and Neo's saving figure. Two examples include when Cypher, about the pull the plug on the vulnerable Neo who is wired into the Matrix (which would result in his immediate death), says it would "take a miracle" to stop him, and suddenly Tank, who Cypher thought he just killed, gets up and stops him. Another incident of God's presence is when, just before Neo and Trinity return to the Matrix to rescue Morpheus, Tank asks "So what do you need, besides a miracle?" and sure enough this is granted and Morpheus is saved.[27] The rise of Neo after he is killed is also nothing short of a miracle. Further, the Oracle can be seen as a messenger of God, and what she tells Neo, that he must chose between his life and Morpheus', results in his choice of action that leads to risking his own life to save Morpheus', and in the process discovers he is the One after all. Had the Oracle told Neo the 'truth' as opposed to what he "needed to hear," he may not have saved Morpheus nor discovered his fighting ability. Eywa, like God in the Matrix, is a central and defining character to the flow and outcome of the plot alluding to the hero myth. At first viewing, Pandora appears to have a somewhat pagan religious

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[26] Although there may be scepticism of Jake's Christ figure allusion, e.g. "…there will no doubt be those who, as farfetched as it may be (to this author), will see Jake Sully as some sort of pseudo-Christ figure, chosen by Eywa to become incarnated into a Na'vi body in order that he might bring about salvation from evil. In my views of Avatar, there is not so much to the christological interpretation as there is to the predestination theme." Michael W. McGowen, (2010), 'A View from the Inside: James Cameron's Avatar,' *Journal of Religion and Film,* 14:1. I stand by, however, to the many rich examples I have used to reinforce his status as the hero/messiah figure who both conquerors and saves. I believe my argument and research holds well against McGowen's statement.

[27] Fontana, 'Finding God in *The Matrix*,' p.206

framework,[28] however at a closer glance one will find that the society of the Na'vi people

is a monotheistic one with their worship only directed to their ultimate deity, Eywa

(which isn't a short step from 'Yahweh'). The film's portrayal of Eywa demonstrates the

goddess' active role in the plot for, as I have mentioned, she intercedes before Neytiri is

about to kill Jake and again when she denies him access to Hometree. Further when

prayed to by the Na'vi people to save the life of Dr. Grace Augustine, Eywa does not

transmit Grace's spirit from her injured human body into her avatar (like she later does

with Jake) but allows her to die. When Grace is dead they remove her oxygen mask (that

humans need to breathe in Pandora's atmosphere) from her face. This is a vital point in

the film because it is where Neytiri learns that humans need these masks to breathe, and

had Eywa not allowed Grace to die, Neytiri would not have witnessed this, and thus she

would have not known how to save Jake's life when his human body was suffocating.

Eywa also answers Jake's prayers and intercedes in the battle against the Sky People with

the help of all the animals from Pandora and finally allows Jake's spirit to pass from his

human form to his avatar's, giving him new life. All these indicate miraculous events that

go beyond the reason of our world. Here I conclude the presence of God in the films is

clear and vital for the outcome and flow of each plot.

In conclusion I have shown how the two protagonists, Neo and Jake Sully, both

embody the archetype of the hero in mythology and the Messiah in the Judeo-Christian

tradition. I demonstrated these connections by highlighting key examples in the two plots

that have specific reference to the hero myth, and the biblical allusions and symbolic

similarities that affirm their similarity to the messianic figure. I then grounded this

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[28] Elaine Carlson (2010), 'Misogyny Under the Dome?,' *Journal of Religion and Film,* 14:1 and Carole
Linnitt (2010), 'The Sacred in James Cameron's *Avatar*,' *Journal of Religion and Film,* 14:1.

connection by acknowledging the diversity in the Jewish and Christian religious thought

that shapes their distinct concepts of the Messiah as a conqueror and/or redeemer. I

further brought enlightenment on the essential role of the monotheistic deity

Yahweh/God in the outcome and flow of the plots to ultimately establish how these films

vividly display religion and myth within their respective storylines.

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Filmography

Avatar

Written and Directed by James Cameron

Date of Release: 2009

Production: Twentieth Century Fox, Lightstorm Entertainment, Giant Studios

The Matrix

Written and Directed by the Wachowski brothers

Date of Release: 1999

Production: Groucho II Film Partnership, Silver Pictures, Village Roadshow