

Neo: a Biblical Messiah Figure by Justin Killam

The concepts, stories, lessons and figures of the Bible have had a profound effect and influence in all aspect of modern life, including popular culture and artistic expression. The figure of the Messiah, taken from the texts of biblical scripture and the stories of Moses in Exodus and Jesus in the Gospels, is no exception. The modern mega-hit *The Matrix* takes a whirlwind of concepts and blends them into both a visually and an intellectually stunning movie. Although the central theme behind the movie is about perception and reality, some very complex philosophical themes, the main character, the hero, Neo has been very clearly and powerfully influenced by the biblical Messiah figure, especially Moses and Jesus.

The Matrix is a movie set in the future where all of humanity has been enslaved by a race of AI (Artificial Intelligence) spawned machines who keep all of mankind under control by way of a massive interconnected and interactive computer generated dream world. Every single person is hooked up to this dream reality and have never known anything else, their minds trapped within a world of the modern 21st century while their bodies are suspended in the real world, used to provide energy for the new world dominators, the machines. The story is about a hacker named Neo and the beginning of his quest to free all of humanity from enslavement from the machines. An over simplistic overview of the movie, but already there is the beginning of a messianic figure in Neo.

Within biblical stories there comes to be a certain messianic archetype that is developed. In film this archetype has also developed,

"Paul Newman's character in *Cool Hand Luke* (1967) has long stood as the archetypal Messianic figure in religion and film studies. In the story, Lukas Jackson is arrested for destroying parking meters while intoxicated, but his true crime is non-conformity . . . Luke introduces a new way of existence . . . and reaches the conclusion that his martyrdom is inevitable." (McEver)

A very basic but usable frame for the messianic archetype: non-conformist, introduction of a new way of existence and conclusion of inevitable martyrdom. Not only are there these archetypal influences on the character Neo, but there are many other influences on the story that can be found in messianic biblical narratives.

Neo begins within the movie as a normal person, trapped within the matrix, unaware, like everyone. However in his beginnings are signs of his role. True to the archetype Neo is non-conformist. Neo is a hacker, roaming the world of computers under his alias name, Thomas Anderson being his given name, and working against the establishment in his own way. The movie gives the audience a glimpse into the world and it's effects on Neo's generation as well as his role in it in a scene when a group of drugged out youth come to him for an illegal computer disk. It is not known what is on the disk, but it is clear from the scene that Neo is a reputable supplier of this illegal software as well as giving an interesting reference to Neo as Jesus. The buyer, when given the disk, exclaims, "hallelujah, you're my savior man, my own personal Jesus Christ." (10:15 - 11:21) Neo is not only part of, but an elite part of a large group of people within this false reality who feel that something is not right. However this scene also portrays the difference between Neo and the majority of this group, while Neo searches for the truth, the majority simply look for quick, cheap and easy escapes, such as drugs.

Neo's reaction to this world and it's establishment is well displayed in a following scene when he is late for work. His boss lectures him on his place within the company. During the entire lecture

two window washers outside are busy cleaning the window and Neo is continuously distracted by the annoying sounds as the squeegees are slide slowly across the window pain. Even though Neo is composed and answers in agreement with his bosses lecture, his attention to the sounds perfectly displays his true reaction to the situation, as does the opening of the very next scene in which he is seated in his cubicle, staring blankly at his desk and a blank computer screen which is not even turned on. It is a perfect scene (14:14 - 15:22) displaying Neo's hopeless distaste for the establishment.

This desperation against authority that Neo has is again displayed when he meets with some of the resistance. The resistance, people who have been awakened from the matrix and know the truth of the real world, contact him and meet with him. In the meeting Neo is given a choice, "it's our way or the highway," (24:48 - 26:10) Neo immediately begins to leave when one of the resistance makes a plea for him to stay. It is only through the speech of this person that Neo agrees to stay. This is interesting because the person who gets him to stay is named Trinity. It is a person, clearly referenced by her name to a biblical theme of a divine messenger, that convinces Neo to choose to stay by his own free will, even against his strong aversion to authority. There is a strong reference to the biblical messiah theme, the messiah being called by a divine authority and having to freely accept.

This theme continues when Neo meets Morpheus and is again given a choice. Morpheus plays an interesting role as a forerunner of Neo, like John the Baptist is for Jesus. He reveals as much truth as he can for Neo before Neo must make the final choice to accept or reject his mission. Neo moves to accept but just before he does Morpheus reminds him that all he is being offered is the truth. (29:11 - 32:00) Neo must choose freely as well as have faith, even in the unknown. This is similar to Moses being confronted with his mission by God in Exodus, as well as Mary in the Gospels who is given the choice to carry the son of God, both who except in faith and free will.

Continuing the model archetype for the messianic figure is that a Messiah shows a new way of existence. The character of Neo is a prominent figure that completes this aspect of the messiah figure. He is the harbinger of the truth for all of humanity that is still trapped within the matrix. However before he can bring the truth to humanity, he must learn it himself. After awakening to the real world Morpheus shows him the truth. It is also interesting that in the scene in which this truth is revealed to Neo (40:52 - 46:05) the audience learns that the start of the whole problem is the creation of AI., Artificial Intelligence. In humanity's arrogance they attempt to emulate the power of God and create an entity in their own image and this is their downfall.

Neo learns the truth, becomes a willing follower of it. In fact his name, Neo, which he chooses over his given name Thomas Anderson, means new. Neo is the savior of the world, he brings with him the promise of the new world. Deeply influenced by biblical themes such as prophecy, oracle, a second coming of a messiah, Neo finds out in the scene (47:20 - 48:25) that he is indeed "the one", or at least Morpheus thinks he is. The one is the second coming of the first person born inside the matrix to understand the truth and set free the first of the resistance, such as Morpheus. Neo is the fulfillment of the prophecy of his second coming.

The ultimate fulfillment of Neo bringing humanity a new way of existence is at the end of the movie in the final scene. Neo, who has come into his power fully and has completely embraced his mission makes clear to the machines that he has come to bring a new world to humanity. (2:10:10 - 2:11:40) It is a perfect ending to a great movie, bringing the audience to a beginning not an ending of the story.

However with the fulfillment of the second part of the archetype messiah figure comes the

end of the movie. The third part, the martyrdom of the messiah, is never reached. It is approached in the movie, Neo is given a choice when Morpheus is captured by the agents of the machine, to let Morpheus die or risk his life going after him. Neo of course goes after and succeeds in rescuing Morpheus. Other than this one exploration of this theme, Neo survives the movie. However this is because the movie is the beginning of a greater story as seen in the last scene.

The Matrix has more than just these few examples of biblical influence throughout the movie. The character of Ciper is a betrayer of the resistance, not unlike Judas who betrays Jesus. The antagonists within the movie, called Agents, who have only one purpose, to destroy the resistance, are cold and machinelike, except one. Agent Smith shows actual human emotion which gives him greater power and makes him the main bad guy. However this emotion, the only one he knows, is hatred. In direct response to this fight against hate, Neo dies and is brought back to life by the love of Trinity. Hate is triumphed over by love. The resurrection of Neo himself within the movie and the fulfillment of his power after his return is a direct parallel of Jesus and his resurrection. Agent Smith reveals to Morpheus that the first matrix was a paradise that was immediately rejected by the humans within it and the current matrix had to be created, a parallel of Eden and it's loss. Even the video cassette case has a parallel to Jesus as he is depicted in art, Neo is displayed prominently in front of everyone else, centered on the box with a halo around his head as Jesus very often is.

Although the movie The Matrix is primarily a movie concerned with exploring the relation between perception and reality in a technological setting,

MATRIX: What does 'The Matrix' mean to you? CARRIE-ANNE: When I first met the guys [Larry and Andy] I had not read the script, but had got the vibe of it from a couple of scenes that I had auditioned for. I got the script right after that and when I read it, it reminded me of one time at school when a teacher proposed this question to the class: 'What if, right now, our sitting in this classroom is just a dream? What if our lives are just dreams?' And in that moment, even though we didn't have big discussions about it, a seed was planted in my mind: it was the first time I thought that maybe life is not the way I was told and taught, maybe things are different. You grow up believing in evolution or religion or that the world is flat, and whatever you've been told is what you believe. I thought that day it could be something different, something I'm not aware of. Sometimes I'll be walking through life and I'll go, "Am I dreaming? How do I know this isn't a dream?" That's kind of the Matrix. (Matrix Website)

it is undeniable that the story itself is a messianic story. The character of Neo is a savior, a clearly biblically influenced messiah figure, shrouded in many subtle but powerful religious themes and influences. It doesn't finish this story, leaving the role of messiah open at the end to a new beginning and a sequel, but it makes an incredible beginning of it. It is also one of the best movies I have ever seen.

Endnotes

McEver, Matthew. The Messianic Figure in Film Christology Beyond the Biblical Epic

The Matrix, written and directed by The Wachowski Brothers. Warner Bros.

(10:15 - 11:21, 14:14 - 15:22, 24:48 - 26:10, 29:11 - 32:00, 40:52 - 46:05, 47:20 - 48:25, 2:10:10 - 2:11:40)

The Matrix Website