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He is the One: The Matrix Trilogy's Postmodern Movie Messiah

Abstract

Many films have used Christ figures to enrich their stories. In *The Matrix* trilogy, however, the Christ figure motif goes beyond superficial plot enhancements and forms the fundamental core of the three-part story. Neo's messianic growth (in self-awareness and power) and his eventual bringing of peace and salvation to humanity form the essential plot of the trilogy. Without the messianic imagery, there could still be a story about the human struggle in the Matrix, of course, but it would be a radically different story than that presented on the screen.

Introduction

*The Matrix*¹ was a firepower-fueled film that spin-kicked filmmaking and popular culture. Its impact came from such components as its striking visual style (from black leather to "bullet time") as well as its many syncretistic visual and textual references to various religions (Buddhism² to Gnosticism³), science fiction literature and action films, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Platonic to postmodern philosophies,⁴ and the mythic hero's journey as described by Joseph Campbell.⁵

Although various other allusions exist, a major mythological motif in the film and its two sequels consists of blatant and vital references to Christ. How the Christ figure is portrayed in the trilogy and some of the implications will be examined here.⁶ To truly be considered a Christ figure in a film, the character's resemblance to Jesus, as Peter Malone suggests, "needs to be significant and substantial, otherwise it is trivial."⁷ Also, the symbolism "needs to be understood from the text and texture of the work of art, be it classical or popular, and not read into the text with Christian presuppositions."⁸

Many films have used Christ figures to enrich their stories through references in actions, dialogue, or visual symbols. Although the messianic metaphors add meaning to the story, they are not usually an essential part of the

plot. In most cases, the metaphors theoretically could be stripped out of the film, and the plot, although diminished, would still function on some level.

In *The Matrix* trilogy, however, the Christ figure motif goes beyond superficial plot enhancements. It forms the fundamental core of the story.⁹ Neo's messianic growth (in self-awareness and power) and his eventual bringing of peace and salvation to humanity form the essential plot of the trilogy. The three acts of the trilogy even roughly parallel the New Testament collection:

- The Matrix is the Gospel of Neo, the coming of age of the postmodern messiah, his death, and his resurrection.
- *The Matrix Reloaded*¹⁰ perhaps corresponds to the Acts of the new messiah and his disciples, chronicling the next stage of their struggle with the machines.
- *The Matrix Revolutions*¹¹ concludes the trilogy with the Apocalypse According to St. Neo, where during the apocalyptic¹² final battle between humanity and the machines, Neo ends the war and brings the final realization of the messianic age of peace between humanity and machines.

Without the messianic imagery, there could still be a story about the human struggle in the Matrix, of course, but it would be a radically different story than that presented on the screen.¹³

The Gospel of Neo

In *The Matrix*, time is illusionary and relative. Although humans think it is 1999, it is actually two centuries later, and everyone is unknowingly dreaming

inside virtual reality (the Matrix). The Platonic shadows on the cave wall are projected by machines.

People are raised in pods where the machines use them as batteries (bioelectricity) while they live in life-long dreamland. Some, however, have woken up to the real world. They can fight the machines in the real world as well as re-enter the artificial reality of the Matrix.

Inside the Matrix, we meet computer programmer Thomas Anderson (Keanu Reeves), who goes by the hacker name "Neo." A group of people comes to his door, and when Neo gives them a disk with the illegal software they want, the leader says (foreshadowing what is to come), "Hallelujah. You're my savior, man. My own personal Jesus Christ." Within moments of appearing on screen, Neo is presented as a cyberpunk Christ dispensing software as sacrament. His role, however, is destined to become much greater.

Later Neo meets Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) who plays John the Baptist as a Zen master. (Later we see his parallels with God the Father as well as Lazarus.) Neo says, "It's an honor to meet you." But Morpheus responds, "No, the honor is mine." Fishburne commented on this bit of dialogue: "I liken it to John the Baptist. 'No, I would rather be baptized by you.'"¹⁴

As John describes Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,¹⁵ Morpheus tells Neo that he is "the One." John baptizes Jesus with water and the heavens open up, revealing that Jesus is the Son of God.¹⁶ Morpheus offers Neo the chance to "wake up" from the illusions of the Matrix to encounter the real world, and Neo wakes up in a watery rebirth into the real world.

Under Morpheus's guidance, Neo gradually transforms from mild-mannered software programmer and hacker into a messianic figure who discovers the power within himself to defeat the machine enemy. Morpheus and Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss), members of the human resistance movement (the "Zionists"), repeatedly profess to Neo that he is "the One" proclaimed by the Oracle to save humanity from the tyranny of the machines.

Zion is a city "near the earth's core" where people awakened from the Matrix live. (Zion was another name for Jerusalem in the Bible.) The city is deep underground to obtain heat (absent on the planet's scorched surface) and to hide from the machines.

After realizing the truth that "reality" inside the Matrix is artificial, Neo is set free to bend the "rules," defying the constraints of gravity and normal time. He learns to run along walls and dodge bullets in mid-flight.

Evil is represented on the machine level by the "agent" programs. They dress like sinister government agents, but they can also "posses" anyone they choose, taking over another's body in their pursuit of Neo.

Evil is also represented on Morpheus's crew by "Cypher," who wears a snakeskin jacket (alluding to the serpent/Satan identification) inside the Matrix and is tired of the real world. He wants to go blissfully back into the Matrix and enjoy artificial steak again. In binary computer code, a cypher or 0 is the opposite of 1. Neo is the One; Cypher is the anti-One.

After sharing a cup of liquor with Neo (as Judas shared a cup with Jesus at the Last Supper), Cypher betrays the crew to the machines. Just before he sets the betrayal in motion, he and Neo get out of a car. They stand close to each other for a few seconds, and Cypher flashes a nervous smile before Neo walks on. The camera lingers on Cypher's smile, and in the context, the scene symbolically is as close as possible for a present-day heterosexual macho male to betray another with a kiss.¹⁷

Cypher starts systematically killing the crew as their inert bodies are connected to the Matrix. When he is ready to pull the plug on Neo, Cypher tells Trinity over the phone that only a miracle could keep that from happening. Trinity

maintains her faith in Neo as the One, and the "miracle" then occurs as a wounded crew member rises and kills Cypher just before he can kill Neo.

Morpheus later risks his life to save Neo from the agents and is captured. Neo then goes on what seems like a suicidal rescue mission. As Neo and Trinity hover in a helicopter outside the window where Morpheus has been bound and drugged, Neo says, "Morpheus, get up. Get up." (This parallels Jesus saying "Lazarus, come out."¹⁸) At Neo's words, Morpheus rouses himself, breaks his shackles, and leaps toward the helicopter.

After Neo symbolically raises Morpheus from the tomb, he is separated from Morpheus and Trinity while they make their escape, and he gives up his life for Morpheus. Neo sheds his blood from bullets in his chest as he is killed by the lead agent Smith (Hugo Weaving). All now seems lost.

In a Pietà-like moment, Trinity (whose name alludes to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) cradles Neo's dead body. Chris Seay and Greg Garrett note:

But Trinity brings Neo back—in the best fairy tale tradition, with a kiss, and in the best philosophical tradition, with an argument: he can't be dead, because the Oracle told her the man she fell in love with would be the One. She loves Neo; therefore, Neo is the One; therefore, Neo cannot be dead. And he isn't. Instead he transforms into a new creature, a true hero, and can now return with new insight and power.¹⁹

Then, during his final (in the first movie) confrontation with the demonic "agents," Neo defeats Smith (for now),²⁰ Neo glows (similar to many artistic representations of the glorified, risen Christ) in the dark hallway (reminiscent somewhat of a tomb), and the other agents run in fear.

After this resurrection, Neo exhibits startling new powers, such as visibly bending reality, stopping bullets in flight, visually seeing the computer code of the Matrix, jumping inside an agent (Smith) and exploding him from the inside, and ascending into the sky at will. All doubts within Neo and among the crew that he is the One are now gone. (Indeed, his powers in the latter parts of the films often seem more "supernatural" than those portrayed in most of the Jesus films of the last half century.)

In the conclusion of the first film, Neo gives a benedictory narration from a phone booth (but to the Matrix foe instead of the faithful) and flies into the sky in a blatant "ascent into heaven."

An intellectual action film, *The Matrix* drips with philosophical and religious references. Morpheus (a reference to the Greek god of dreams, who here tells Neo that he has been living in a dream world) is the captain of a hovercraft named Nebuchadnezzar, and Nebuchadnezzar was the Babylonian king who could not remember his dreams until they were interpreted by Daniel.²¹ Nebuchadnezzar

also conquered Jerusalem (Zion) in the Old Testament, sending its people into exile. In *The Matrix*, the people of the subterranean Zion are free from the machines, yet live in exile from the earth's surface.

Briefly glimpsed at the core of the Nebuchadnezzar is a plaque with the words "MARK III No. 11." With the Wachowski brothers' incessant attention to details, including names,²² it should not be passed off as coincidence that, in the Bible, Mark 3:11 describes how people possessed by evil spirits fall down before Jesus and say, "You are the Son of God." Indirectly even the ship declares that Neo is the One.

Neo's given name, Thomas A. Anderson, is also subtly revealing. 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 favored by Jesus to describe himself. But Thomas Anderson takes on the name "Neo," which is an anagram of "One." When Thomas Anderson claims the name Neo, he becomes a "new man."

Acts and Apocalypse

In the first sequel, *The Matrix Reloaded*, Neo's powers have grown. He fights off dozens of duplicate Agent Smiths with superhuman speed and agility. He flies at supersonic speeds to the rescue.²³ He heals Trinity's fatal bullet wound with a touch (by reaching inside her, pulling out the bullet, and restarting her heart).

His long black leather coat seems to be a cross between a priest's robes and Superman's cape. His messianic mystique has grown among the rest of the "awakened" humans. The children and common folk of Zion worship him, bringing food offerings, and requesting that he watch over loved ones.

But his destiny becomes more convoluted and sinister. He is unsure of what he is supposed to do, and his doubts reemerge. He discovers the prophecy about him may have been a lie. In attempting to save Trinity and the rest of humanity, he may be bringing the end to all human life on the planet.

As Neo has grown in power, we discover that Agent Smith, who had been destroyed at the end of the first film, has resurrected²⁴ somehow independent of the Matrix and with new powers of his own. He is Antichrist to Neo's Christ,²⁵ and he is determined to destroy all humans as well as the Matrix.

As Smith takes over Banes's body, Banes cries out, "Oh, God." Smith replies, "'Smith' will suffice." The Smith-possessed Banes becomes the new Judas figure who betrays Neo and the human race.

The third part of the trilogy, *The Matrix Revolutions*, released just six months later, continues where *Reloaded's* cliffhanger ending stopped. The stakes of the story rise to an apocalyptic level. The destruction of both the Matrix and the real world of Zion is at hand. The Oracle tells Neo:

I see the end coming. I see the darkness spreading. I see death. And you are all that stands in his way ... Very soon [Smith] is going to have the power to destroy this world. But I believe he won't stop there. He can't. He won't stop until there's nothing left at all ... One way or another, Neo, this war is going to end. Tonight, the future of both worlds will be in your hands or in his.

Just before the machines are about to finish off the awakened remnants of humanity in Zion, Neo and Trinity journey to Machine City. On the perilous flight (in the real world, not the Matrix) Neo is blinded by Banes ("possessed" by Smith) with an electrical cable. Smith/Banes taunts him, "Blind messiah." Although physically blinded, Neo learns to "see" machine energy with an inner vision, and he defeats Banes.

Neo and Trinity continue in spite of a firestorm of explosions and attacks by demon-like machines. They fly up above the never-ending storm clouds, and Trinity sees the real sun - perhaps the first human to do so for a hundred years. After this glimpse of "heaven," they descend back down into the dark machine hell below them. Trinity dies in the crash landing of their ship, and Neo journeys on alone where no human has gone and survived.

Arriving at his goal in Machine City, a god-like face composed of hundreds of individual machines talks to Neo. Neo and the machines agree to collaborate in order to destroy Smith before Smith destroys everything.

On a Machine City cross consisting of electrical cables, Neo jacks back into the Matrix, and he fights an apocalyptic battle with Smith in the rain-soaked crumbling streets. After Neo appears to be defeated (as Jesus appeared defeated on the cross) and possessed by Smith, cross-shaped light erupts from Neo's chest, and Neo finally wins the definitive victory over the Antichrist figure of Smith.

The Matrix is "healed" from the destruction caused by Smith, and Zion is saved. Neo makes peace between humanity and the machines, ending a hundred years of war. (The human and machine reconciliation harkens to a messianic age of lion-and-lamb peace.)²⁶

Neo is last seen in a crucifix position, "crowned" with a circular bandage around his wounded eyes, and surrounded by light. Inside the Matrix, the Oracle and a girl watch a sunrise from a city park. The girl asks the Oracle if they will see Neo again someday, and (in a promise of a Second Coming) the Oracle responds, "I suspect so. Someday." As a symbol of blessing and hope, the movie closes on the sunrise over the city.

The Matrix Mythology's Meaning

Media and cultural critic Read Mercer Schuchardt writes:

[I]t is not without coincidence that *The Matrix* was released on the last Easter weekend of the dying twentieth century. It is a parable of the original Judeo-Christian worldview of entrapment in a world gone wrong, with no hope of survival or salvation short of something miraculous. *The Matrix* is a new testament for a new millennium, a religious parable of the second coming of mankind's messiah in an age that needs salvation as desperately as any ever has.²⁷

Schuchardt speculates that the film's directors asked themselves how to speak seriously to a culture reduced to comic books and video games and their answer was:

You tell them a story from the only oracle they'll listen to, a movie, and you tell the story in the comic-book and video-game format that the culture has become so addicted to. In other words, *The Matrix* is a graduate thesis on consciousness in the sheep's clothing of an action-adventure flick. Whether you're illiterate or have a Ph.D., there's something in the movie for you.²⁸

The films raise many questions about our society, showing us one nightmarish possible future. "The Matrix is doing something absolutely unique in the history of cinema. It is preaching a sermon to you from the only pulpit left. It is calling you to action, to change, to reform and modify your ways."²⁹

The film's cult following can be explained with many reasons, but the followers also included a surprisingly large number of devout Christians. A reviewer for *Christianity Today* calls *The Matrix* one of the best movies of 1999.³⁰ The Christian following especially may find that this "film is surprisingly true to

Biblical theology - despite its unorthodox appearance.”³¹ To the diverse audience of the films, a generation that would never sit through turgid traditional Bible epics, Christian theology becomes more accessible and attractive because of Neo's presentation as a postmodern messiah.

¹ Dirs. Larry and Andy Wachowski, Warner Brothers, 1999.

² See, for example, James L. Ford, “Buddhism, Christianity, and The Matrix: The Dialectic of Myth-Making in Contemporary Cinema,” *Journal of Religion & Film*, Vol. 4, No. 2, October 2000 <<http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/thematrix.htm>>. See also his article “Buddhism, Mythology, and The Matrix” in *Taking the Red Pill*, ed. Glenn Yeffeth (Dallas: Benbella Books, 2003) 125-144.

³ See, for example, Frances Flannery-Dailey and Rachel Wagner, “Wake Up! Gnosticism and Buddhism in *The Matrix*,” *Journal of Religion & Film*, Vol. 5, No. 2, October 2001 <<http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/gnostic.htm>>.

⁴ In an online chat with viewers of the DVD (“Matrix Virtual Theatre: Wachowski Brothers Transcript,” 6 Nov. 1999 <<http://www.warnervideo.com/matrixevents/wachowski.html>>), the Wachowski brothers are asked: “Your movie has many and varied connections to myths and philosophies, Judeo-Christian, Egyptian, Arthurian, and Platonic, just to name those I’ve noticed. How much of that was intentional?” They respond: “All of it.”

⁵ *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

⁶ The major elements will be examined, but all the minor and supporting elements are too numerous to be treated in an article this length.

⁷ Peter Malone, “Christology in *Edward Scissorhands*,” *Explorations in Theology and Film*, eds. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2000) 76.

⁸ Malone 76.

⁹ The correspondences with Jesus are not perfect in every detail, of course, but the number of blatant and subtle parallels is astonishing.

¹⁰ Dirs. Larry and Andy Wachowski. Warner Brothers, 2003.

¹¹ Dirs. Larry and Andy Wachowski. Warner Brothers, 2003.

¹² Conrad Oswalt in “*Armageddon at the Millennial Dawn*” (*Journal of Religion & Film*, Vol. 4, No. 1, April 2000 <<http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/armagedd.htm>>) notes the apocalyptic and Christ figure elements in the original *The Matrix*. The apocalyptic level is raised much higher in the sequels. See also the chapter “Movies and the Apocalypse” in his book *Secular Steeples: Popular Culture and the Religious Imagination* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003) 157-188.

¹³ *The Animatrix* (Warner Brothers, 2003) released on DVD and video (not in theaters) contains other animated stories by various directors concerning the Matrix that only indirectly relate to Neo or not at all. *The Animatrix* fills in the background of how the humans originally created the machines, exploited them, then feared them, and tried to destroy them. The blame for the evil present in *The Matrix* ultimately rests on the shoulders of humanity.

¹⁴ Quoted in Chris Seay and Greg Garrett, *The Gospel Reloaded* (Colorado Springs: Piñon Press, 2003) 83. See also Matt. 3:14.

¹⁵ John 1:29.

¹⁶ John 1:32-34.

¹⁷ Read Mercer Schuchardt qualifies the Judas parallel in that the agents are looking for Morpheus at that moment, not Neo. However, in betraying Morpheus’s crew, he betrays Neo as well. “What is the Matrix?” *Taking the Red Pill*, ed. Glenn Yeffeth (Dallas: Benbella Books, 2003) 5.

¹⁸ John 11:43.

¹⁹ Seay and Garrett 30.

²⁰ In *The Matrix Reloaded*, Smith comes back and says Neo’s encounter with him has somehow “unplugged” him from the Matrix. Now he is a free rogue agent with even greater power and malevolence. Although Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection is commonly viewed as a victory over Satan, Satan is portrayed in the Bible as still active in the world until the decisive apocalyptic conflict in Revelation 20.

²¹ Dan. 2, 4.

²² In “Matrix Virtual Theatre: Wachowski Brothers Transcript,” the Wachowski brothers say the names “were all chosen carefully, and all of them have multiple meanings.”

²³ Link, the new *Nebuchadnezzar* operator says of him, “He’s doing his Superman thing.” Since Superman as a Christ figure has been noted by many, here we have a second-generation Christ figure reference.

²⁴ Compare with the apocalyptic beast from the sea of Revelation 13 that had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound healed.

²⁵ The Oracle says to Neo about Smith: “He is you. Your opposite. Your negative.”

²⁶ Isa. 11:6; Col. 1:20.

²⁷ “What is the Matrix?” *Taking the Red Pill*, ed. Glenn Yeffeth (Dallas: Benbella Books, 2003) 5.

²⁸ Schuchardt 13.

²⁹ Schuchardt 16.

³⁰ Steve Lansingh, “Ten Films that Made my Year,” ChristianityToday.com 17 January 1999
<<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/103/21.0.html>>.

³¹ Paul Fontana, “Finding God in the Matrix,” *Taking the Red Pill*, ed. Glenn Yeffeth (Dallas: Benbella Books, 2003) 161.