

Biblical and Theological References in *Avatar* (2009)

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There's plenty not to like about James Cameron's sensational new film. On the eve of the film's release in Italy, the Vatican called it "simplistic" and full of "pseudo-doctrines...that turn ecology into the religion of the millenium." See one report of that [here](#).

A New York Times reviewer said the same thing a few weeks earlier, calling the film a "[long apologia for pantheism...](#)"

A couple of young men with whom I'd chatted last week said the film was great for the technical effects but not so good as a story, since that has been told and retold many times already. "This film," one said, "will be remembered for the technology."

An Onion film review called it "[supremely goofy.](#)"

Yet people continue to go see it, and the film is raking in hundreds of millions of dollars from viewers not only in the U.S. but around the world. A recent article spoke of the film's popularity in places like Russia and Brazil.

I loved it. There were several points where I responded with deep feelings: in the exquisitely beautiful scenes of the graceful, floating tree seeds, for example, and in the horror of metal gunships spewing destructive power upon a pristine Eden-like land. There is little escaping the emotional and physical power of 3-D visual effects joined with full surround sound. At one point I ducked as an object seemed to be flying right at me! At times I wondered how bugs got into the theater on a cold winter's day, when in reality (virtual reality, that is), they were actually in the movie.

Avatar is a work of art. Unlike many films (I think of the popular *The Hangover*[2009]), there is a whole curriculum waiting to be drawn out of this film. With so many people seeing it and so many commenting on it, the film is a ready-made study piece. It can be an exciting way to enliven 1) youth and adult education 2) a sermon series and 3) efforts to practice talking together about the media we experience.

As the film's musical theme "I See You" declares, when we look at another

living being or at life itself, when we truly look to *see*, we enter into a sacred relationship. There is much that this film invites. As Tillich reminded the church, intentional theological reflection begins with a relationship with life that then stimulates questions.

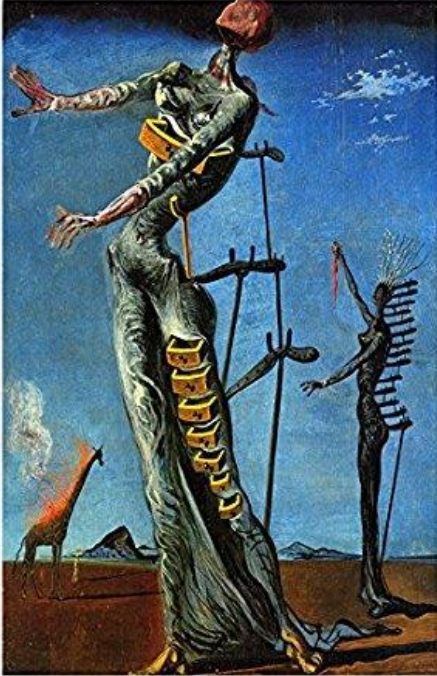
At its best, when the church engages the questions honored and provoked by art, it serves as a bridge between culture and biblical theology. We encourage a depth of inquiry by raising questions; we encourage dialogue by encouraging the drawing of comparisons and contrasts between a work of art and the biblical witness; we notice a prophetic socio-political critique and perceive an incarnational embrace of story as parable; we model a way of living, thinking, and being that honors the world, the arts, culture, and history while being faithful to the meta-narrative of biblical tradition.

Part II of my reflections will focus on the mythical/ biblical references I find in the film. While most critics have uncovered the obvious mythical references, most of these same critics are illiterate when it comes to biblical material. They miss the irony of a line from the corporate executive ordering the destruction of the Home Tree and its sacred seeds when he blurts, “it’s just a sacred fern for Christ’s sake!”

James Cameron is more aware than we think when it comes to biblical theology. Those who only see a “theology of pantheism” have completely missed Cameron’s deep—and amusing—theology of grace, with full reference to the ancient/modern Augustinian-Pelagian debate.

Cameron's "Avatar" (2009) and Dali's "The Burning Giraffe"(1937)

A few hours after watching "Avatar" I went to a favorite Costa Rican Cafe for supper. I was seated at a small table near the door that faced a wall. As I waited to order, I noticed directly in front of me a Salvador Dali print with two long figures in the foreground and off in the background a smaller figure. It was of an animal on fire. strange and striking image took me back to "Avatar," in which is a short scene of a running horse on fire. It was a picture of pure horror resulting from the cruelties inflicted upon the living beings in the film's Pandora. Was James Cameron making a reference to Salvador Dali?



In the foreground of the Dali print are two long, blue women. The women of Pandora in "Avatar" are long and blue. Dali called his women in the print before me "tail bone woman" and the Pandora creatures did have tails! Coincidence? The collective unconscious at work in the artistic imagination?

Dali used the image of the burning giraffe in his 1930 film, "L'Age d' Or" (The Golden Age) and again in his 1937 "The Invention of Monsters." He apparently saw this as a premonition of World War II, and his burning giraffe is an image of "the masculine cosmic apocalyptic monster." See my source and a look at the print [here](#). The "monsters"

of war in "Avatar" are steel helicopters, the large mother ship-plane, and the massive robotic "soldiers" piloted by individuals inside these walking structures.

Cameron's Colonel Quaritch embodies this "masculine cosmic apocalyptic monster" in the film. This makes him, too, an "avatar" of sorts.

I've been unable as of yet to locate any confirmation by Cameron of this reference to Dali's work. It may be I am stretching this a bit much, but the parallels are very striking.

The juxtaposition of the Dali image with the scene of the burning horse in the film would be an excellent starting point for a discussion or sermon about some of the issues raised in film. An additional image suggestion would be Picasso's "Guernica" from the same time period, and the terrified horse in the center of the painting.

Biblical Narratives in *Avatar* (2009)

When one of the main characters of a film is named "Dr. Grace Augustine", one's theological ears need to perk up! Augustine of Hippo was called "the Doctor of Grace." He and a fellow named Pelagius argued over the doctrine of original sin and the meaning of grace. I suggest that James Cameron was

not promoting pantheism in this film, but settling in his own way the ancient arguments about grace and awarding Pelagius (judged a heretic by the church) the winner's prize.

Sin and Grace

One discussion thread for Avatar is indeed this: the concept of sin and grace as found in the Garden of Eden in the biblical narrative, compared and contrasted with that found in the garden planet of Pandora. While investigating the ancient debate between Augustine and Pelagius, this study thread would also include evaluating questions raised by various critics concerned about more modern concerns about pantheism, neo-paganism, etc. in the film.

Questions to include might be: What is pantheism? How is pantheism different from eco-spirituality? What is panentheism? What is Mother Goddess religion? What is paganism? Are these to be feared? Why or why not? Where might we find examples of this in the film's story and dialogue? How does this debate get played out in various church and non-church circles. What are the issues at stake e.g. political, social, cultural, economic, moral, and religious?

Another thread related to this is stimulated by the fact that this story takes place on a mythical planet named Pandora. What is the Greek myth of Pandora about? Is Pandora an equivalent of the biblical Eve? Are the curses that emerge from Pandora's jar (or, as it is mistranslated, box) similar to those God gives Adam and Eve?

Moving on: the people of Pandora are called "Na'vi." The biblical Hebrew word for prophet is "nav'i" or "mouth of God." What does the filmmaker intend to tell us with this reference? How do these people in the movie live and function like biblical prophets, then and now?

The female Na'vi character, Neytiri, gives Jacob a pomegranate-like fruit from a tree. His eyes seem to open up at that point to really behold the beauty of where he is. How does this fruit scene compare and contrast with the fruit scene in the story in the Garden of Eden? How do the two sacred trees in Pandora compare to the two in Eden?

The Jacob and Esau Story

Besides parallels in the Genesis account of the Garden of Eden, there are some comparisons in the film to the Jacob/Esau story. While the comparisons might be weak and stretched too much, they yet invite some imaginative consideration.

In Avatar, Jacob has a twin brother named Tom. Jacob is translated from the Hebrew to mean “supplanter.” In the film, it was Tom, Jacob’s brother, who was to be the avatar. With his untimely and tragic death, Jacob takes his place.

After seeing Avatar, it is interesting to read the story of Jacob’s ladder in Genesis 28:10-17. There is a communication between one realm and another, heaven and earth, with many winged creatures (angels) flying around. A blessing is given, that through Jacob all the families of the earth shall be blessed. There is divine assurance of ongoing presence and guidance, and then Jacob awakens, realizing he has been traveling between heaven and earth, the “house of God” and the “gate of heaven.”

Later, in Genesis 32, Jacob wrestles with the mysterious angel, gains a limp, and has a name change. His new name is “Israel” or one who struggles or strives with God. As some suggest Avatar advocates reverting to some kind of nature-worshipping “tribal existence,” clearly the parallel with the coming tribal confederacy and covenant community of ancient Israel in Jacob’s story might fit...at least in an imaginative and inspired preaching context! After all, the covenant of “shalom” extends peace to every aspect of creation including the land, the water, the sky, the animals, and people!

John 1

A third connection to a biblical narrative might be found in the Gospel of John and the prologue of the first chapter, with its theological concepts of light and word. Light and Word translate into life, as at the beginning in Genesis 1, and both light and word become flesh, a human being, one who embodies word, light and love. Might it make some sense to briefly and lightly touch on the imaginative correlation of the Hindu “avatar” in reference to this Christian “epiphany” to draw out comparisons and contrasts?

Other snippets of interesting material:

- a. There are coffin-like structures shown throughout the film, with juxtaposed scenes from a real coffin holding Jake's brother to the avatar-pods. There is no getting around the themes these evoke: death, life, rebirth, renewal, and transformation.
- b. Noting the worship practices depicted in the film: singing at the sacred tree; honoring ancestors; prayer; laying on of hands; the presence of ritual at sacred place.
- c. Treating relationships with nature and living things with respect, honoring a sacred relationship. While some may see this as pantheism, it seems more of an honoring of the sanctity of all things. Note the blessing/saying "grace" before taking the life of an animal, and/or the connection with horses and birds as the Na'vi linked strands of hair with the strands and fibers of another's life.
- d. The clash of different systems of belief: one in "military fact" and power, and another in the sacredness of deity and/or nature. There is a clash of cultures: military, natural, and scientific.
- e. The relationship of the term "Avatar" in Hindu mythology/ theology with "Epiphany" in Greco-Roman mythology/political theology and in Christian theology.
- f. How does the final scene parallel the final scene of Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" and what are we to make of it?
- g. Just as one world is shown to be of advanced technology, another world is shown as one of advanced spirituality?
- h. The Halleluia Mountains figure beautifully in the film and are the closing images as the credits roll. "Halleluia" is "praise God" in Hebrew.
- i. The connection with the themes found in Dali's "Burning Giraffe" as mentioned in a previous blog.
- j. The valuable mineral the corporation seeks, with the aid of its mercenaries, is called "Unobtanium." The unobtainable has a high price.

k. Lines in the film that invite some discussion (I have not found a script yet; these lines are what I thought I heard while watching the film, and I wrote them down in the darkened theater while wearing 3-D glasses!):

“I was a warrior who dreamed he would bring peace.”

“The Great Mother does not take sides-she protects the balance of life.”

“The wealth of the world is all around us.”

“Grace is hit.”

“I’m a scientist; I don’t believe in fairy tales.”

Did Jake call out “holy snake!” as one of the snake-headed creatures flew out of the Mother Tree?

l. The theme song, “I See You” sings of the film’s joyful embrace of conscientious, intentional, life-honoring relationships and the “colors of love.” Where is love in the film? Is the full complexity of the term “love” there, in the biblical sense? Do we find in the film an implied shallow “pantheism” or is it more of what we find in John’s Gospel and the phrase, “For God so loved the world...” Doesn’t John affirm that the world is imbued with love? Isn’t love embedded in each creature, all of life, the animate and inanimate?