A photograph of Keanu Reeves as Neo from the movie The Matrix. He is wearing a black trench coat, a black t-shirt, and black sunglasses. He is looking off to the side with a serious expression. The background is a blurred, industrial-looking setting.

generation

exile

and

neo

restoration

a study of messianic hope in the matrix

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April 15, 2000

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“Here are the bare bones of a tale that will be popular with the young everywhere: A man travels a lot, is often alone. He seeks spiritual comfort and avoids boring work. He is more intelligent than his parents and most of the people he meets. He encounters many queerly lovely hints that spiritual comfort really can be found.”

Kurt Vonnegut, “Why They Read Hesse.”¹

In late August 1999 I went with some friends to see *The Matrix* at a theater in East Greenwich Village. We had all seen the film a number of times, but we share the philosophy that a movie worth watching once is worth watching over and over. When we entered the theater ten minutes before showtime I was amazed to find that there was not a seat in the house. *The Matrix* had been open for over four months already and yet it was standing room only. After the film began to play it was apparent that nearly everyone there had seen the movie countless times because the audience cheered and yelled with all the zeal that consumes cult film fans.

In its opening weekend alone *The Matrix* made over fifty million dollars and on DVD it has sold more copies than any other movie in the US or Great Britain. Surprised by the popular reception of *The Matrix*, film critic Steven Armstrong writes “even the best action and sci-fi movies come and go, and most cult films bomb at the box office before finding a loyal audience on video, but *The Matrix* has broken all the rules.”²

Critical reception of *The Matrix* was mixed and its notable success with popular audiences occurred more in spite of its reviews than because of them. Janet Maslin of the *New York Times* echoed the comments of many of the film’s critics when she stated: “*The Matrix* should be commended for its special effects but it lacks depth in other crucial areas.”³ The Academy of Motion Pictures made its own statement when it awarded *The Matrix* for its special effects, sound, and editing, but did not even nominate it for any category that pertained to the substance of the film.

The reason for the popular reception of *The Matrix* among young audiences is that it fits into a popular genre of movies such as *The Graduate*, *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, *Trainspotting*, *Fight Club*, and *American Beauty* (among many others) which all advocate free thought and regard the fate of working for “The Man” with contempt and condescension.

Yet, beyond the surface message of “free your mind”—a double entendre used throughout the film—there is a theme that runs much deeper which I plan to explore in this paper. Anyone with a religious background will notice some of the more obvious Biblical parallels. However, as one analyzes the overarching themes in the movie it becomes apparent that *The Matrix* resounds with the characteristic elements of First Century Jewish and Christian apocalyptic thought. The theology of *The Matrix* is informed by the concerns of First Century Jewish and Christian apocalyptic expectation, especially hope for messianic deliverance, restoration and establishment of the Kingdom of God. In this paper I will explore these themes and reveal how this film is surprisingly true to Biblical theology—despite its unorthodox appearance.

The first part of this paper will focus on the micro issues of Christian symbolism in *The Matrix*. I will tease out some of the allegorical and Biblical elements from various scenes *within* the film. Much of the allure and mythological significance that has grown up around this film focuses on these micro elements.

¹ Vonnegut, p. 107.

² Armstrong, Steven. *Sunday Times* (London), Feb 13, 2000.

³ Maslin, Janet. *The New York Times*, March 31, 1999. This opinion was not shared by the three Christian reviewers who praise what they view as a Christian theme of messiahship that runs throughout the movie.

The second part of this paper will take a step back and focus on the macro thematic issues which can only be understood when viewing the film as a whole: *i.e.* the above-mentioned elements of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic expectation. It is the presence of these macro issues that make *The Matrix* what I believe it to be: namely, one of the most carefully made and well conceived big-budget movies of all time. I distinguish between these “micro” and “macro” elements since the former are those elements which were intentionally woven into the film whereas the latter were, I suspect, included without the authors’ explicit intent. This last point will be treated in the conclusion.

A note about sources: because it has been less than a year since the release of *The Matrix* (as of the writing of this paper) scholarly critiques were unavailable. In lieu of this, however, there are a number of forums for discussion about *The Matrix* (on the internet, of course), some of which contain insightful commentary. I have used these where applicable (especially in Part One) and URLs for these web sites are available in the bibliography. These “popular” commentaries are, I believe, especially appropriate for a paper about an artistic work intended for mass distribution. Since it is to ordinary people that this film was marketed, it is only appropriate that their voices be included in this critique of the film. For secondary sources, I have found the work of New Testament scholar NT Wright especially useful and will draw heavily from his analysis of Second-Temple Jewish apocalyptic hope. All Biblical quotations are NRSV, unless otherwise noted.

Part I. Micro: Elements of Religious Significance Within *The Matrix*

The premise of *The Matrix* is this: at the end of the Twentieth Century humankind invented an artificial intelligence which soon spawned a race of machines that overtook the planet. In an effort to combat this evil army humans ignited the atmosphere and blackened the sky because scientists believed that this would render these solar-powered machines useless. Instead, these machines found a new source of energy in human body heat which they harvest in massive power plants. To keep the crop of captive humans from revolting they are all mentally inter-networked into a near-interactive virtual reality called “The Matrix,” which simulates earth as we currently know it. Like being in a perpetual dream that imitates life, all humans believe that they are living out their normal lives, when they are in fact strapped into a small pod fueling the very power source that keeps them enslaved.

At some point before the action of the film begins a man was born inside of *The Matrix* who became aware of the situation and somehow managed to free himself and others. When he died, it was prophesied that he would return and that his coming would bring an end to the war and free humanity. As *The Matrix* begins, a man named Morpheus believes that he has found “the One” who was promised by the Oracle. The rest of the film is devoted to testing Morpheus’ belief.

Most of the articles, reviews, and websites I have consulted that discuss the religious significance of *The Matrix* base their findings in allegory, especially parallels between the film's characters and figures from the Gospels.⁴ Despite the strong bias against allegory held by many contemporary New Testament scholars, the roles played by the characters in *The Matrix* require an allegorical read, if for nothing else because these are the elements noticed by the general movie-going public for whom this film was made. Of course, the problem with allegory is that it is sometimes difficult to know where to stop. This slippery slope can sometimes obscure more than it illuminates. With these dangers in mind, I will attempt not to impose what is not directly there in the text in interpreting *The Matrix* characters and their Biblical models. Furthermore, to balance this allegorical approach I will indicate noteworthy dissimilarities; though in some cases these dissimilarities are so great that they need not be mentioned. In this endeavor we will take our inspiration from Wittgenstein and look for "family resemblances," not necessarily perfect matches. I will explain these allegorical elements as they apply to each character rather than in a linear fashion tracing the film's plot.

(A) Character Allegorization

(i) Neo

The natural place to begin an allegorical interpretation of *The Matrix* is with Neo. Early in the film Morpheus announces to Neo that he is "the One" (which is an anagram of N-e-o), and as the film progresses we learn that "the One" will be the person who is able to defeat The Matrix and free humanity. In ancient Israelite tradition there was an expectation that a great military leader—probably from the Davidic line—would arise and restore Israel to its former glory while subjugating all of Israel's enemies (cf. Isa 9, 11, 42, 61). This person was referred to as the messiah (= "anointed one" in Hebrew) because anointing was a sign of kingship. All the canonical Gospels report that when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem he was hailed as a king by the people who hoped that he was the one who would finally free Israel from foreign rule and restore it to its proper relationship with God. The evangelists go to great lengths to explain that Jesus' mission was not at all military. However, the claim that Jesus was the Messiah even though he did nothing to further the cause of a sovereign Israel was also confusing because no one in ancient Israel expected the suffering spiritual king that the Gospels report Jesus was. In some ways, then, Neo's mission in being "the One" is closer to the military messiah that Israel expected than to the soteriological role that Jesus fulfilled. This issue will be discussed in Part Two. There are, however, many noteworthy parallels between Neo and the Jesus of the Gospels.

It is not until the second scene of the movie that we meet our hero and savior, Thomas Anderson, who works as a software programmer and moonlights as "Neo," a notorious computer hacker. Our first equation of Neo with Jesus happens at the first sight, as we meet him, is asleep at his computer with music blaring in his headphones.⁵ Neo is awakened as he re-

⁴The website "The Matrix as Messiah Movie" (<http://awesomehouse.com/matrix/parallels.html>) gives a very detailed allegorical read to *The Matrix* and provides links to other sites that share this approach. Even the negative reviews—see especially the reviews by Armstrong, Bowman and Lim—note the allegorical elements but mock the Wachowskis' shallow attempt to infuse a vacant cyber-sexy action movie with messianic significance.

⁵The fact that it is "Massive Attack" playing in his headphones foreshadows Neo's role later in the film.

ceives an anonymous message on his computer: “wake up, Neo...The Matrix has you ...knock, knock” followed immediately by a loud knocking at his door. As he is greeted by Choi (a person apparently buying some sort of illegal computer software) we have our first messianic foreshadowing. As Choi thanks Neo he emphatically states “Hallelujah. You’re my savior, man. My own personal Jesus Christ.”⁶ There is even an indication of the Markan messianic secret in that Neo warns Choi not to tell anyone “about this” and Choi responds “Yeah, I know. This never happened. You don’t exist.” This scene is the audience’s first hint of Neo’s messianic significance.

In what is no doubt a subtle Biblical pun, Neo’s introductory scene is followed by his call narrative. Though this is not a Jesus reference *per se*, many important figures in the Bible are “called” by God—sometimes with an annunciation by an angel, others by God directly—and given instructions. (For example, Abraham is called and told to go out into the land of Canaan.) In the archetypal format of a call narrative, as illustrated in the calling of Abraham (Gen 12:1, 22:1) in the Hebrew Scriptures and the Virgin Mary in the New Testament (Lk 1:38), God states the name of the person being called and that person responds, “Here I am, Lord.” In the version of this type-scene played out in *The Matrix* the angel is replaced by a Federal Express agent who says “Thomas Anderson?” Neo replies “that’s me.” When he opens the package he finds a cellular phone on which he immediately receives his “call” from Morpheus wherein he is given instructions.

As the film progresses the audience receives conflicting data as to whether Neo is “The One.” To confirm Neo’s “Oneness” Morpheus (whose faith in Neo is unwavering) brings Neo to see the Oracle. The Oracle’s message to Neo is mixed: she implies (but never says) that he is *not* the one. She further adds the bad news that Morpheus, who is convinced that he has found the One, will offer his life to save Neo, and that Neo must decide if he will let Morpheus die or will give his own life in exchange. We will see how this becomes theologically significant in the film’s last scenes.

However, before the grand, climactic confirmation that Neo is the one, there is an overt allusion to the miracle of the raising of Lazarus (John 11). Just following his visit with the Oracle, Neo and the crew are betrayed by Cypher, and Morpheus is taken captive by three agents. Realizing that this is the first part of the Oracle’s prophesy coming true, Neo goes to rescue Morpheus in what turns out to be the most dramatic and exciting action sequence in the film. During this scene, Morpheus is held in a long, narrow room much like the cave in which Lazarus was buried. Neo swoops down in a helicopter to rescue Morpheus who has been drugged unconscious. Neo’s command “Morpheus, get up! Get up!” echoes Jesus’ command, “Lazarus, come out!” (Jn 11:43). In both these instances it is the power that emanates from the agents of salvation (Neo and Jesus) that raises the men in the tombs who each come out with their hands and feet bound (Jn 11:44). From a theological standpoint both these instances mark a turning point in the careers of Jesus and Neo. In the Gospel of John the raising of Lazarus is seen as the climax and turning point of Jesus’ public ministry because it is during this last and most dramatic of Jesus’ public miracles that Jesus attracts a large enough crowd to become a public threat (11:48,53; cf., 12:21). Correspondingly, in *The Matrix* this dramatic and seemingly im-

⁶ In my opinion this is the only example of a character’s using the exclamation “Jesus!” or “Jesus Christ!” to denote any messianic significance to Neo/Thomas. The dozen or so others I counted all seem to be garden-variety blasphemy, no more remarkable in their use here than in any other action movie.

possible rescue—which is nothing short of miraculous—banishes any last doubts that Trinity and Tank had about Neo being the One. Also, it is here that Neo is called to the attention of the agents who previously set their sights only on Morpheus.

The scenes that follow contain many of the elements of the passion narratives. Neo's bold and violent entry into the government building is done with the same dramatic flair as the so-called cleansing of the Temple—albeit far more violent. This comparison is less far-fetched than it might appear because the Temple and this generic government building are centers of the governing authorities that Jesus and Neo oppose. Of course, in Jesus' eyes the Temple is inherently good but has become corrupt whereas the government building is the home of a purely evil empire with no redeeming qualities.

In other parallels with the passion narratives, the most significant similarity is that Neo, like Jesus, is killed, resurrected and ascends bodily into the sky. In the scene following Morpheus' safe escape from the Matrix, Neo is left to face Agent Smith alone. After a show-down in a subway station Neo is sent to a nearby motel to room 303,⁷ where there is a special phone that will allow him to exit from the Matrix. Upon entering the room, Neo is shot by Agent Smith and he falls and dies. The prevalent screen placement of "303" should alert the sensitivities of any New Testament-savvy audience member who is aware of the numerical significance of the number three in the Gospels. Since it would not be possible within the plot of the film to have Neo dead for three days, this symbolic visual cue is all the film needs to provide to alert the audience members to the significance of this momentary death.⁸ Yet, like in the Gospels, this death is not the end of the story, because moments later Neo comes back to life. In all the Gospels, it is a woman or a group of women who find the empty tomb and are the first to see Jesus (and/or a heavenly figure). *The Matrix* does not miss this opportunity to follow the Gospels. In a dramatic Pieta fashion, Trinity holds the lifeless Neo and is the first to see him as he comes back to life.

As a further resurrection parallel, it is significant to note the differences between the pre- and post-resurrection Neo. Though all four canonical Gospels tell of the resurrection, its true centrality within Christianity theology can be traced to Paul. In First Corinthians 15, which is one of the most theologically significant passages of the New Testament, Paul explains the centrality of the resurrection—both Jesus' and the full resurrection of believers at the end of days—to Christian belief (1Cor 15:12-19). What is significant about this passage for our discussion about *The Matrix* is Paul's idea of what the resurrected body will be like. He uses the enigmatic phrase "*soma pneumatikon*" (15:44) which is translated in the NRSV as "spiritual body." Scholars have spilled much ink in arguing what exactly Paul may have envisioned a *soma pneumatikon* to be. However, we need not concern ourselves with the details of this debate here but merely need to compare Paul's description of the *soma pneumatikon* to the characteristics of the risen Neo. Comparing the fleshly body to resurrected body Paul writes: "What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, raised in power." (15:42b-43).

⁷ In the first scene Trinity was also in room 303 of an abandoned motel. Here we have the envelope sequence: the film ends where it began.

⁸ Like the Gospels, the makers of the Matrix make it clear that Neo really is dead (literally flatlined). If he just rallies after getting shot that would not be as miraculous, just as it would not have been significant if Jesus or Lazarus just "swooned" and were then resuscitated.

When we view the risen Neo in light of Paul's description of the *soma pneumatikon*, there are some remarkable similarities. The post-resurrection Neo is able to do things that were unimaginable in his former life such as stopping bullets with a command, jumping inside an agent's body and exploding it, and ascending into the sky at will. We know that the risen Neo is "imperishable" because there is nothing that the agents can do to hurt him. After they try shooting him, Agent Smith lunges at Neo, but Neo effortlessly fights him off with one hand behind his back. This post-resurrection Neo even has an unmistakable radiance about him, though not like the brilliant white reported of the risen Jesus (Matt 28:3, Mk 16:5, Lk 24:4, Acts 26:13).

Just as the disciples only understand Jesus' predictions about the Temple after Easter morning (John 2:22), Neo's resurrection make sense of the things he was told earlier by Morpheus and the Oracle. For example, there is significant foreshadowing in Neo's question "are you saying I can dodge bullets?" and Morpheus's response "I'm saying, when you're ready, you won't have to" that the audience cannot understand until after Neo's resurrection.⁹ We know that Neo is only "ready" after his resurrection because just moments earlier he tried dodging bullets and was hit by one and almost killed. But after his resurrection he is indeed ready, and just as Morpheus predicted, untouchable by bullets. All post-resurrection appearances of Neo clearly indicate that his body is raised in "power, glory and imperishability." The things Neo does after his resurrection are only possible for a *soma pneumatikon*, because even Neo's powerful fleshly (*i.e.* virtual) body is still nothing compared to his post-resurrection body.

When we combine the above-quoted prophecy of Morpheus with the prediction given by the Oracle that Neo's full potential will only be realized in his "next life" (that is, after his resurrection) we get a clear picture that the death and resurrection of Neo *had* to happen in order for the war to eventually be won. In other words, unless Neo was killed and resurrected the war could not be won because Neo only reaches his state of full actualization after the resurrection. The inevitability and necessity of the Passion/Easter events is a theme well known in the Gospels (Mt 16:21, 17:22, 20:18; Mk 8:31, 9:31, 9:33; Lk 9:22, 9:44, 18:33; Jn 2:4, 2:19, 7:30, 7:33, 8:20-21, 10:15, 12:7, 12:27, 13:21, 11:51, 12:16). The Gospels also tell us that Jesus freely gave himself to be killed so that all may partake in the kingdom of God. We see this sacrificial element in *The Matrix* passion story because as Neo goes to save Morpheus he does so despite the forewarning of the Oracle that he will have to sacrifice his own life. Further, because it is the codes to Zion that the agents want (so that they can obliterate the remaining humans) Neo's self-sacrifice saves humankind.

Another resurrection similarity is that neither the disciples nor Morpheus were expecting the messiah to die or be resurrected because there was no explicit prediction of this given by the scriptures or the Oracle. Though the messianic texts of the canonical Hebrew Scriptures are varied, vague and few, none even hint that the messiah will be executed and/or resurrected.¹⁰ The fact that in all four Gospels the disciples are frightened and confused by

⁹ The Oracle's prediction that Neo's "got the gift" but is waiting for his next life is also illuminated and proven true after he is resurrected.

¹⁰ There is a famous passage in Isaiah 52-53 about the suffering servant of God, but this figure does not seem to be linked to the redeemer expected by Israel.

Jesus' death and then subsequently surprised by his post-resurrection appearances strongly suggests that none of Jesus' disciples were expecting the resurrection. We see the same shock and utter confusion in Morpheus when Neo is killed—"It can't be!"—which indicates that in all the prophecies he received from the Oracle he was never told of the coming death and resurrection of the One.

The final similarity to note between the Gospels and *The Matrix* is their respective endings. The last shot of *The Matrix* (Neo flying up into the sky) directly follows the narrative of Mark,¹¹ Luke and Acts which all tell of the ascension of the risen Jesus.

One notable dissimilarity which needs to be mentioned is that though the actions of Neo's life mirror those of Jesus, the eschatological significance of Neo—as the one whose return will end the battle and usher in a new age of peace—is much more closely aligned with that of the risen Christ expected to in the second coming. Some people might object to the idea of a supposed Jesus figure shooting people with guns. However, violent destruction of God's enemies was a live option for establishing the Kingdom of God and the fact that Jesus did not do this led to confusion among his followers.¹² We will see this idea developed further in Part II.iv-vi.

(ii) Morpheus

Though Morpheus wears a number of allegorical hats throughout the film, his most prevalent role is as John the Baptizer, especially John as he appears in the Fourth Gospel. The role of John the Baptizer in the Fourth Gospel is to be a witness to Jesus, a witness to the light (Jn 1:7). John downplays his own importance, and makes it clear that his only duty is to make way for the coming of Jesus. These following verses summarize John's mission:

"Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal..." (1:26-27)

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared "Here is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world! This is of whom I said 'after me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'" (1:29-30)

"I saw the spirit descending on him like a dove and it remained on him. I myself did not know him but the one who sent me to baptize with water said 'he on whom you see the spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'" (1:32-33)

Morpheus follows John The Baptizer both in his role as announcer of the coming savior and in his unwavering certainty of belief that Neo is the One.

Morpheus: We've done it, Trinity. We've found him.

Trinity: I hope you're right.

Morpheus: You don't have to hope, I *know* it!

¹¹ For Mark it is part of the so-called "longer ending."

¹² NT Wright points out that the Qumran War Scroll speaks of military tactics and establishing the kingdom of God in the same sentence (p. 306).

This certainty which Morpheus has early on does not waver throughout the film even when Neo tries to tell him that he is not the One. Also, Morpheus expresses the reverence to Neo that John the Baptizer has towards Jesus.

Neo: It's an honor to meet you.

Morpheus: No. The honor is mine.... You see, you may have spent the past few years looking for me, but I have spent my entire life looking for you.... You are the "One", Neo.

(later on)

Morpheus: Get Neo out! He's all that matters!

Though this parallel works well for certain aspects of Morpheus's role, Morpheus also assumes a more complex and extensive relationship with Neo (guru, leader, substitutionary sacrifice) than John had with Jesus. While John quickly disappears from the plot of the Gospels and is killed in obscurity off scene, Morpheus remains in the center of the drama and lives to the end.

(iii) Trinity

There is a knee-jerk reaction to equate Trinity with Mary Magdalene because they are both prominent women in a world of men. While there is something to this allegorization, it is also problematic. Though Mary Magdalene's historicity is not doubted due to her appearance in Matthew, Mark, and John (and perhaps in Luke), we actually know very little of her relationship with Jesus and her role in early Christianity. What the Gospels do tell us is that she was with Jesus for the time of his public ministry and that it was she who found the empty tomb and was the first to see Jesus. John further reports that it was Mary (no last name) who anoints Jesus with her hair before he is killed (Jn 12:1-6).

Trinity mirrors this elusive role in so far as she is with Neo as he is killed and because she is holding him, she is the first to see him when he is resurrected.¹³ Further, her embracing of Neo as he comes out of *The Matrix* echoes the Gospel of John wherein Mary Magdalene runs to embrace the risen Jesus.

The closest scene this film has to an anointing occurs while Neo is fighting Agent Smith and Trinity tears her clothes to wipe Neo's head. The use of her clothes is similar to the personal giving of Mary Magdalene who uses her hair, but this connection is tenuous so we cannot make too much of it.

One notable dissimilarity is that even though the Gospel stories of Mary Magdalene have been carefully redacted, there is no indication that her relationship with Jesus was sexual. Therefore the kiss Trinity gives (which hints at a future relationship) Neo further obscures her allegorical equation to Mary Magdalene.

¹³ One could make the case that it was somehow through Trinity's power that Neo comes back to life. In this case she would have to be allegorized as God—an assertion which is further strengthened by her name which is overtly theistic. Trinity's role as the power that resurrects Neo will be discussed in the next section where I explain the presence and absence of God in *The Matrix*, but for now I have to conclude that equating Trinity as God is unsubstantiated.

(iv) Cypher

In some ways the clearest allegorical match is Cypher as Judas, the betrayer. The Oxford English Dictionary reports a number of meanings for the word “cypher” (or cipher): “ 1. A method of secret writing... 2. A secret message... 4. An obsolete name for zero...” The “secret” applies both to Cypher and Judas: Cypher’s clandestine rendezvous with Agent Smith mirrors Judas’ secret meeting with the high priests where he makes arrangements to betray Jesus (Mk 14:10, Mt 26:14; Lk 22:4). Also, Cypher, like Judas, is a “zero” because “it would have been better if he had not been born” (Mk. 14:20b).

Both Cypher and Judas are paid for their actions. In the Gospel of Matthew Judas receives 30 silver pieces to turn sides. In a bit of ironic humor Cypher gets a nice dinner and the opportunity to be reincarnated (or, more precisely, *reinvirtuated*) as an actor. The fact that both are paid for their actions highlights their common greed, selfishness, and myopia.

Moreover, neither believes for a moment that the person he is betraying has any ontological, eschatological or soteriological significance. Unlike the other disciples Judas is never recorded referring to Jesus as, “lord.”¹⁴ Even at the last supper when Jesus predicts his betrayal and all the disciples say “Surely not I, Lord” Judas proclaims “Surely, it is not I, Rabbi” (Mt 26:25). Right from the outset of *The Matrix* Cypher makes it clear that he does not have any faith in Neo. When he is told by Trinity that Morpheus believes Neo is the One, Cypher replies “We’re gonna kill him. Do you understand that!?” Also, when meeting in private with Neo, Cypher mocks the whole idea of “the One” saying: “So you’re here to ‘save the world!’ Jesus!, what a mind job! What do you say to something like that!?” Neither Judas nor Cypher believed that the object of their betrayal was the savior of the world or, presumably, they would not have gone through with their actions. Judas and Cypher’s lack of faith of is a contrast to the Beloved Disciple (of the Fourth Gospel) and Trinity who never waver in their conviction that Jesus and Neo are the promised saviors.

The particular elements of Judas played out in Cypher rely on both Johannine and synoptic material. In the story of the last supper as it is recorded in the Gospel of John, the Beloved Disciple asks Jesus who his betrayer will be. Jesus responds “It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.” (13:26). After Jesus makes this identification Judas immediately leaves to meet with the authorities “and it was night” (13:30). The previously described scene where Cypher and Neo meet (late at night) alludes to this identification of the betrayer in that they share the same cup of moonshine and immediately following this scene Cypher meets with Agent Smith. Further, Neo drinks this liquor even though it tastes like gasoline thus echoing Jesus’ prophetic statement “am I not to drink from the cup my father has given me?” (Jn 18:11).

Allusions to the synoptic accounts of Judas can be seen in Matthew, Mark and Luke’s report that Judas identified Jesus to the authorities by embracing him with a kiss. The nervous smile that Cypher flashes at Neo (on which the camera lingers) just as he alerts the Agents as to their whereabouts with his cell phone is reminiscent of the betrayal with a kiss.

The only qualification about equating Cypher with Judas is that Morpheus is the person for whom the agents are specifically looking. This is not, however, fatal to the allegory because in turning over Morpheus, Cypher is betraying the whole crew and all of humanity, because Zion will be destroyed after Morpheus is broken.

¹⁴ “The Matrix as Messiah Movie” (<http://awesomehouse.com/matrix>).

(v) **Morpheus's Crew**

The rest of Morpheus's crew—Tank, Doser, Apoc, Switch, Mouse—approximately fit into the role of the disciples. Of course, there are not twelve so we cannot take this analogy too far. However, there are two other noteworthy similarities. First, it is worth mentioning that among Jesus' disciples, each of the Gospels reports a pair (or pairs) of brothers. The fact that there are brothers within the small crew of Morpheus does not seem coincidental.

Second, just as the Twelve Disciples and the general public were confused about Jesus' nature, Morpheus's crew share mixed opinions about Neo. The two extremes in *The Matrix* are polarized by Trinity who believes from the beginning that Neo is the One and Cypher whose last line is "No, I don't believe it!" Everyone else falls somewhere in between. In the synoptic Gospels Jesus asks his disciples, "who do you say that I am?" Peter answers, "the Messiah..." (Mk 8:28, Mt 16:16, Lk 9:20, cf. Jn 1:41). Jesus rewards Peter's faith by declaring that on this "rock" (which is a word play on Peter) he will build his church. Shortly after Peter's declaration, each of the synoptic also report an event wherein Jesus is transfigured before Peter, James and John who then have the decisive pre-Easter "a-ha" moment of the Gospels. The name "Tank" suggests the same sort of power and stability that Peter (or Cephas) has and indeed there are some parallels between these two. Most noteworthy is *The Matrix* version of transfiguration wherein Neo amazes Tank as he miraculously rescues Morpheus and Trinity from the Agents' building; Tank's joy and certainty is expressed in the phrase "I knew it. He's the one." The fact that Neo pulled off this rescue is Tank's (and the audience's) decisive "a-ha" moment that Neo indeed is the One, as Morpheus predicted.

(vi) **The Agents**

The final characters of this allegorical scheme are the agents. The closest Biblical parallel is to Satan (or the devil or the Anti-Christ), but as we will see this is not at all a perfect fit. The Apocrypha and the New Testament contain conflicting and varied understandings of Satan so it is difficult to locate a starting point in this allegorization. In the synoptic Gospels Satan plays the role of the tempter who attempts to foil Jesus' earthly mission before it begins by offering him worldly power in exchange for his worship. Neo is offered a similar "deal" by Agent Smith, but he too refuses to cooperate with the powers of evil.¹⁵

The synoptic Gospels also tell us of numerous instances of demonic possession which are mirrored by the Agent's ability to possess the bodies of anyone hardwired to the system. However these two meanings and uses of "possession" are wholly dissimilar beyond the surface.

One interesting parallel with the three agents is that in the Book of Revelation there is an "unholy trinity"¹⁶ made up of dragon/Satan, the First Beast and the Second Beast (Rev 12-13) who are defeated by the risen Christ just as the risen Neo defeats the agents. However, this too is approximate.

¹⁵ "The Matrix as Messiah Movie" (<http://awesomehouse.com/matrix>).

¹⁶ The term is a favorite of Professor Daniel Harrington, SJ, of Weston Jesuit Theological Seminary. I do not know if he coined the phrase.

The true difficulty with equating the agents with Satan is that the agents are not really the enemy in *The Matrix* in the same way that Satan is the enemy of God in Biblical theology.¹⁷ The true enemy in this film is not a being at all but rather a larger self-conscious computer system. The death of Agent Smith in no way signifies that the war is over, but something more akin to a turning of the corner: now humanity finally has a chance. This is unlike The Book of Revelation where the death of Satan is the final hurdle before the creation of the New Heaven and the New Earth.

I believe that in this particular case it will be prudent to resist our allegorical urge to cast the three agents as specific Biblical characters and instead view them as generally representing agents of evil who must be defeated on the way to the realization of human freedom.

(B) Other Biblical Allusions of Importance: Nebuchadnezzar and Zion

“Nebuchadnezzar” and “Zion” are names that appear throughout *The Matrix* and they are loaded with apocalyptic significance. These terms will be integral to our discussion of the eschatological themes of the film, so we will first flesh out the Biblical background and theological significance of these two names.

(i) Nebuchadnezzar

The name Nebuchadnezzar first appears in the Bible in the Second Book of Kings. As king of the Babylonian empire it was Nebuchadnezzar who led the armies which sacked Jerusalem and exiled the two remaining tribes of Jacob who inhabited the southern kingdom of Judah. Nebuchadnezzar’s name appears often in the three major prophets and most of the minor prophets. The Babylonian Empire (and therefore its leader in turn) is frequently used as catch phrase and pseudonym for present evil authorities, just as we might nowadays call any adversary a “Nazi.”¹⁸

The interesting question is why would the makers of this film name this ship after an agent of destruction when Morpheus’s mission is one of freedom? Clearly Morpheus and his crew exist on the side of goodness and the artificial intelligence that enslaves the planet is evil and needs to be defeated. The use of this name in reference to goodness seems to present a hermeneutic difficulty. The solution I propose is something of a subtle point in Biblical theology that runs counter to common wisdom. The answer lies not in the book of Kings but in the prophets, especially Jeremiah.

¹⁷ I use the phrase “Biblical theology” to get around the fact that there is no single Biblical consensus on who Satan is or what is the extent of his power/freedom. The idea that there are equally powerful forces of Good and Evil competing for sovereignty in the universe is a dualistic, Eastern notion unknown to the Bible.

¹⁸ In Revelation, though the evil empire is called Babylon, it is widely agreed that the author intended Rome. Likewise, Daniel wrote about the Temple desecration of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, though he refers to this king as “Nebuchadnezzar.” For a modern parallel, *M*A*S*H* was set in the Korean war, though it was a critique of the Vietnam war.

In ancient Israelite cosmology there was no post-enlightenment understanding of a natural world governed by natural forces. The deistic notion that God exists on a transcendent plane removed from the day to day affairs of the human realm was unknown. Instead, the Israelite's God was an ever-present reality who was active in history and human affairs. In the mindset of Ancient Israel nothing happens that God does not allow.¹⁹ In the words of Biblical scholar Dominic Crossan, "whatever happens to Jews in the contemporary world empire is interpreted in terms of God's punitive and slavific designs."²⁰ According to this world-view, then, the destruction of the Temple and the exile had to be explained within the parameters of justice. We find it to be the case in all of the major prophets that the exile and the Temple's destruction were just retribution for the people's (especially the kings') wickedness in worshipping false gods. Thus, if the exile occurred as part of God's plan, and was handed out as punishment by God, then Nebuchadnezzar was an agent of God's justice, like a bailiff in a courtroom. That is, Nebuchadnezzar did what God *wanted* Him to do. Speaking for God, Jeremiah tells the people "if any nation or kingdom will not serve this king, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and put its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon then I will punish them with the sword, with famine, and with pestilence, says the LORD, until I have completed its destruction by his hand" (Jer 27:8).²¹

In keeping with this theological framework, Nebuchadnezzar is an agent of God's wrath just as "Death" is sent by God to punish the wicked in Revelation 6. God's blessing on King Nebuchadnezzar is the only theologically acceptable way to understand his victory over Judah according to ancient Israelite theology.

Thus Morpheus's ship, 'The Nebuchadnezzar,' has the dual connotation of having God's blessing ("we're on mission from God") as well as an agent of mass destruction sent to wreak havoc on the corrupt establishment.

(ii) Zion

The word "Zion" has rich and varied meanings in the Bible. Perhaps the most consistent understanding of it appears in Psalm 76:2 as the dwelling place of the LORD. Like Israel itself, Zion is both a place and a people; while Zion refers to the mountain that is home to the Temple it is also often used to signify the whole people of Israel.²² Yet, it is essential to understand that in both these terms the meaning is somewhat transcendent. Because of God's presence, Zion is a *cosmic* mountain as well as a *holy* people. Mt. Zion was seen as existing in sacred space, apart from the confines of ordinary time. Thus even during the Exile, while the physical Temple lay in ruins, the cosmic Zion remained alive in the holy people during their time in Babylon.

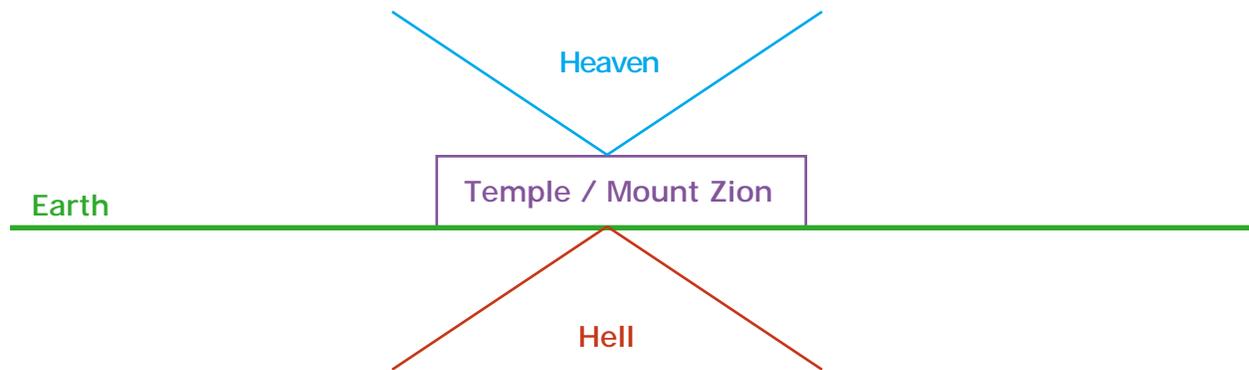
¹⁹ The wisdom writers understood the concept of the suffering righteous and propose alternative theodicies. But within the Pentateuch, Deuteronic history, and the major prophets, the solution to the problem of evil is grounded mainly in an understanding of justice that entails punishment for the wicked and vindication of the righteous.

²⁰ Crossan, p. 31.

²¹ First-Century Jewish historian Josephus also understood the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE as a sign that God has switched his Most Favored Nation Status to Rome (*Jewish War*).

²² Isaiah 51:16; Cf. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, p. 137.

There are four important aspects of Biblical Zion traditions that correspond directly to *The Matrix*. First, according to Professor Jon Levenson, Mt. Zion was seen as the *axis mundi*, the center of the universe, the meeting place of heaven and earth and hell (Ezek 38:12).²³



As a locus of these three spheres of existence, it is a place wherein messages can be passed back and forth, from God to humans.²⁴ In the Temple it was the priests who brokered this traffic of information. *The Matrix* understands a similar Zion-centered cosmology as it places Zion literally at the center of the Earth. Also, we can note the idea of a flow of cosmic information from the hereafter expressed in the role of the Oracle. That is, it is the Oracle who is privilege to the knowledge of the larger plan for the salvation of humanity and, like the Priests of the Temple, it is she who is the portal for this flow of information.

Second, Zion is the promised land. According to the Book of Exodus, God was saddened to to see his people enslaved under Pharaoh so he promised them deliverance. YHWH elects Moses as the leader of His people and assures them of passage to a land that flows with Milk and Honey (Ex 3:8). This new land is Zion. In *The Matrix*, Tank echoes YHWH's overarching promise to Isreal in his line "If you live long enough you might even get to see it [Zion]." In both these cases Zion is held out as a promise of the way things can and will be in the future. Also, like Moses, Neo never sees Zion (at least within the action of this film which was written as the first part of a trilogy.) But more than Zion, the geographic place, there was an understanding of a heavenly Zion which remains in cosmic sync with its mundane twin.²⁵ For this reason, a longing for Zion among ancient Isrealites was a desire for union with God, whose presence was immanent in Zion. In the following section we will see how this becomes crucial in *The Matrix*.

²³ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, p. 111, 135.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

Third is the utter importance of Zion. Though this is not strictly Biblical, there was rabbinic understanding that Zion was the blueprint from which the world was created. In the Talmud and midrash, Zion is equated with the Garden of Eden, a paradise, the first of God's creation, the ultimate firewall that prevents the flood of chaos from overtaking the world.²⁶ We see a similar understanding of the ultimate importance of Zion in *The Matrix*. Here, instead of being the first of God's creation, it is the last remaining human city. Since Zion is all humans have left they will do anything to defend it; without Zion all is lost and the war is over. Tank is even willing to sacrifice his commander if it means that he can save this last human dwelling: "Zion is more important than you, me, even Morpheus."

After the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE "Zion became a poignant symbol of national disgrace, of the contradiction between the great royal city of promise and memory and the pitiful ruins of the present era."²⁷ The fourth parallel between the Zions of the Bible and that of *The Matrix* is that the new Zion, wherein God's people will be restored to their intended glory, will be brought about by the messiah. This will be the subject of Part II of this paper.

Part II. Macro: Ancient Israelite messianic expectation in *The Matrix*.²⁸

If we are to make the claim that *The Matrix* is a religious movie we need to ask the question, "so, where is God?" One might notice that in Part I no character in the movie could be properly allegorized as God. To explain this seeming omission, it is now time to move beyond allegory and begin to view *The Matrix* through the lens of first-century apocalyptic thought.

The observation that there is no mention of or reference to God in *The Matrix* leaves us with two options. First, we can conclude that there is no understanding of God in *The Matrix*. If we accept this claim then we effectively undermine the carefully constructed allegorical model to which we have devoted the previous pages, because if there is no God, then the idea of a messiah is meaningless. However, the second route of interpretation that we can take is that God is played by God. That is, the God figure in *The Matrix* is somewhat akin to the Judeo-Christian notion of an intangible God, who, though transcendent, is active in the affairs of human history and the economy of salvation. It is this second model of God in *The Matrix* that I will explore in this latter half of the paper.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 135.

²⁷ Levenson in *ABD*, p. 1102.

²⁸ Everyone we now think of as "the early Christians," including all of the New Testament authors, thought of themselves as Jews. Since Paul and the other New Testament writers viewed Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish eschatological expectation one cannot always make a hard and fast distinction between Jewish and early Christian eschatology. When I use the phrase "Jewish and Christian eschatology" I refer to those beliefs that were informed by Jewish expectations regardless of whether we choose to classify those who held this beliefs as "Jewish" or "Christian." The eschatological sources which inform this film are from varied and disparate texts, so it will be impossible to claim that it is either Jewish or Christian in its world-view because it is an eclectic mix of both.

Since this theistic read of *The Matrix* is not immediately apparent this claim requires further explanation. Against the argument that an understanding of God exists in *The Matrix* is the fact that this film contains precisely as many references to God as the *Song of Songs*: none.²⁹ Except for Morpheus' single, passing remark about "going to church" as one of the vacuous things that one can do within *The Matrix* and the garden variety blasphemy that peppers the film's dialogue, this film is free from theistic references of any kind. Yet the key to finding God in *The Matrix* is not to look for God directly, but rather to observe God's presence in the general flow of the film.

To explain this point I must borrow a metaphor from astronomy: by definition, it is impossible to see a black hole. However scientists have detected about a dozen black holes in space by charting the movements of the stellar bodies that orbit these black holes. The same can be done with God in *The Matrix*. Though we cannot readily see God *within The Matrix* we can triangulate God's whereabouts by observing the eschatological vector of the film. We will see that the view of God in *The Matrix* is somewhat akin to Karl Rahner's conception of God. In *The Matrix*, God is both the center of gravity as well as the point on the transcendent horizon towards which the eschatology of the film flows. We will find an answer to the question of "where is God in *The Matrix*?" by addressing six theological issues that plagued the religious thinkers of the first century CE.

(i) Where are we?

The short answer to this question for both the characters of *The Matrix* and the inhabitants of first-century Palestine is: 'we are in exile.' Of the people living in first-century Palestine, New Testament scholar NT Wright writes,

Most Jews of this period, it seems, would have answered the question 'where are we' in language which, reduced to its simplest form, meant: we are still in exile. They believed that in all senses which mattered, Israel's exile was still in progress. Although she had come back from Babylon, the glorious message of the prophets remained unfulfilled.³⁰

According to historians, the exile lasted only about fifty years - from the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 BCE until the Israelites were allowed to return by a decree of King Cyrus of Persia in c. 539. However, this supposed "restoration" happened only at a superficial level and was in no way the eschatological restoration predicted by the prophets. When the Israelites reclaimed their land and found their temple in ruins, a theological problem arose that could not simply be solved with bricks and mortar. This theological problem intensified

²⁹ Throughout earlier centuries the Song of Songs (or "The Song of Solomon") was read as a profoundly theistic statement and many rabbis held this up as one of the holiest writings outside of Torah itself. However, most modern exegetes now agree that this was written as a secular love poem which no theistic undercurrent. In this way the Song of Songs is like *The Matrix* and this paper is like the centuries of interpretation of the Song of Songs. It is wholly possible that the makers of this film never intended many of the ideas religious which I draw out in this section and yet, as a whole, this film works quite well as a recasting of the eschatological hopes of the Bible. Sometimes authorial intent takes a backseat to hermeneutics.

³⁰ Wright, p. 268.

in the following centuries when Israelites found themselves in their own land but enslaved by various foreign powers, including the Selucids, the Ptolmeys and the Romans. Writing in the mid-fifth century BCE, Nehemiah summarizes this point well:

Here we are, slaves to this day—slaves in the land that you gave to our ancestors to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts. Its yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins; they have power over our bodies and our over livestock at their pleasure and we are in great distress. (Neh 3:36-37)

In response to this quotation Wright states, “The message could not be clearer: Israel had returned to the land but is still in the ‘exile’ of slavery, under the oppression of foreign overlords.”³¹ The restoration expected by Israel was not simply a return to their homeland, but rather a renewed relationship with God. Being back in the homeland without the immanence of God was simply going through the motions. Israel with a foreign King was no longer Zion. For Jews of this time, as for Jews of today, the restoration was (and is) a future event not yet completed. It was an unsettling feeling caused by the continuing exile that fueled the existential discontent and eschatological hope of post-exilic Jews such as Paul. The restoration was of such great concern to the people in the first century that the first words the disciples say to the risen Jesus is to ask when he will restore Israel (Acts 1:6).

This view of the exile as a continuing event was also held by Paul, though he extended the cosmological scope of this problem. He believed that the real exile was not an event that happened by human agency in 587 but was more fundamentally rooted in the exile of Genesis 3, where Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden and exiled from God’s presence. For Paul, Adam’s sin ushered in an age of death (1Cor 15:21, 49) and since this time we have moved ontologically further away from God because of our sins. Yet, this ontological chasm between God and humanity was bridged with Jesus’ death and resurrection. Jesus’ resurrection was the breaking-in of the end-time, the first fruits of the great eschatological harvest, wherein all the righteous will be raised and creation will be made anew. Resurrection, for Paul, will be the decisive event of the new age wherein sin and death—which are the ultimate enemy of God’s sovereignty—will be no more and God will be “all in all” (1Cor 15:28; cf. Ps110.). Restoration will be the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth and the elimination of death. Until this great ontological reordering at the end-time, we must exist in exile from God, as slaves to our own sin.

This feeling of being in exile has strong parallels in *The Matrix*. This feeling emerges in the conversation between Trinity and Neo as The Nebuchadnezzar is running from the sentinels.

Neo: Where are we?

Trinity: Their old service inway systems.

Neo: Sewers?

Trinity: These used to be cities that spanned hundreds of miles. Now these sewers are all that’s left of them.

³¹ Ibid., p. 269.

Trinity's answer to Neo's question is a statement of exile *par excellence*. In contemporary thought, sewers are the quintessential place of exile, as exemplified by Sartre, who hid in the sewers of Paris while fleeing from the Nazis. In the above conversation, there is a subtext that moves beyond issues of geography. Trinity's answer to Neo's subtly profound question not only details the physical location of their ship, but also explains the human condition in the year 2199. The vast majority of humans in this time are slaves imprisoned in a giant power plant. Like Nehemiah's people, a foreign power controls their bodies and steals from their harvest (literally their body heat). Those few who are fortunate enough to not be direct slaves are subjugated as fugitives who are forced to hide underground. These people in hiding, like the "restored" Israelites, are aliens in their own land. This is a problem that will not simply be solved by reinhabiting the surface of the Earth (which, like the Temple, lays in ruins) but requires a radical restructuring of the social order—*i.e.* a defeat of the enemies of Zion—which is nothing short of eschatological. Restoration will happen only upon the destruction of The Matrix. Until then, the people of *The Matrix* will remain in exile.

(ii) What time is it?

Within eschatological discourse, the question 'what time is it' really asks 'how far along are we in the sequence of end-time events?' This question is as widely debated today as it was two thousand years ago. On this question there is a sharp distinction between Christian and Jewish thought. In relation to this question, *The Matrix* follows the Christian apocalyptic model most closely. According to most of the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures, we are physically in exile and temporarily sometime before the restoration. Christian writers of the first century agree that there is an end which has not yet come, but they disagree as to our exact placement on the eschatological timeline. Here we will outline the timeframes of Paul and Revelation, because these are the most similar to *The Matrix*.

As a pious Jew, Paul views all of Jewish history as significant. However, his primary benchmark in locating our place in salvation history is the Jesus resurrection. Paul views the resurrection as the decisive beginning of the end-time events. The next significant event for which he anxiously awaited was the rapture and the second coming. His view of salvation history and future events will happen according to this plan:

- (a) Events of history according to the Hebrew Scriptures (creation, sin of Adam and Eve, flood, Tower of Babel, election of Abraham, exodus, giving of the law, covenant, wilderness wandering, taking of the holy land, judges, united monarchy, building of the Temple, divided kingdom, exile, faux-restoration, Second Temple)
- (b) Death and resurrection of Jesus
- (c) Parousia, second coming, rapture (1Thess 4:15-18)
- (d) Full resurrection of the dead (1Cor 15:50-53)
- (e) Establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth

According to Paul, we should understand our place in eschatological history as being somewhere between (b) and (c). It is important to note that Paul believes that these final three events will happen basically contemporaneously and that this whole sequence of events is not

far off in the future; there is even an indication in 1Thess 4:15-18 that Paul expects himself to still be alive when the rapture happens.³² Paul hinges his belief in the immanence and certainty of the coming end-time events in the resurrection, which, for him, is both the guarantee of the future resurrection of the dead and the sign that the end will come soon. For Paul, Jesus' resurrection is like the first drop of rain after the sky has darkened and the temperature has dropped—the great storm cannot be far off because the idea of a single resurrection in the middle of time was meaningless to Paul's Jewish sensibilities.

It can be summarized, then, that Paul understands a semi-realized eschatology wherein the end-time is near but the final sequence of events has not yet happened. Paul's response to the question of "what time is it?" would reflect his idea that we are on the cusp of the great newness that will soon be consummated when the complete reign of God is an earthly reality.

Though Morpheus does not have any idea of the exact chronological year, we will see that he has a clear and distinct understanding of his place on the eschatological timeline:

Neo: What is this place?

Morph: More important than "what" is when.

Neo: When?

Morph: You believe that it is the year 1999 when in fact it is closer to the year 2199. I can't tell you exactly what year it is, because we honestly don't know....

In a later scene, Morpheus explains that he believes he has found the One who will "end the war and bring freedom to our people." Morpheus's certainty that he has found the One—"you don't have to hope, I know it!"—translates into certainty about his place on the eschatological timeline. Like Paul, Morpheus believes his own time to lie near the end of the old age. For Morpheus, the finding of Neo is a guarantee of imminent eschatological events, just as Paul considers the resurrection of Jesus to be the first fruits of the coming harvest. The pattern of events in the eschatological drama of *The Matrix* follows this outline:

- (a) Human history prior to 1999
- (b) The invention of AI
- (c) Subsequent battles between humans and AI, the scorching of the sun
- (d) The enslavement of humanity
- (e) The pre-Neo is born inside The Matrix, frees the first humans, and dies
- (f) Battles resume, the Oracle predicts the coming of the One
- (g) Neo is found
- (h) Neo is killed, resurrected and becomes fully actualized
- (i) The battle is won and human freedom is restored

³² Paul's perception of the imminence of this event is in 1Thess must be read in conjunction with his claim in 2Cor that he will not be among the living when the parousia happens (cf. 2Cor 4:14-5:10). For a full discussion of the discernable shifts in Paul's thinking on resurrection see Richard N. Longenecker's essay "Is There Development in Paul's Resurrection Thinking?" in *Life in the Face of Death*.

The on-screen action of *The Matrix* begins during (f) and carries through the end of (h). As this chart illustrates, the end of the film is a bit of a cliffhanger because we are told what will happen but we do not witness it (at least in this movie, which is written as part one of three.) Yet we cannot overestimate the significance of the arrival of Neo, because this marks a new moment in salvation history that is nothing short of the eschatological turning point of the larger (a) through (i) sequence outlined above.

The climax of the entire timeline is the combined events of (g) and (h). NT Wright points out that “the more oppressed a group perceives itself to be, the more carefully it will calculate when liberation will dawn.”³³ In this regard, the crew of the Nebuchadnezzar are as oppressed as people can be and they anxiously await the coming of the One. A line that emphasizes this longing is Tank’s remark, “We’re not supposed to talk about this, but if you are who Morpheus says you are this is a very exciting time!” Indeed, this should be a very exciting time because it is the breaking in of the new age; this is *the* decisive moment in the great eschatological battle where the tables turn and humans will begin to reclaim that which is theirs. To borrow a line from *Fight Club*, what will be exciting about this moment is that Tank and the other living humans (as well as the audience) will have “front row seats for a theater of mass destruction.” The German word ‘*shadenfreude*’ (= the joy in witnessing the defeat of one’s enemies) describes well the source of Tank’s excitement. Apocalyptic literature understands a dualism between the present age and the age to come. It is about the coming of this moment where the discontinuity begins and the enemies are defeated that Tank is excited.

Paul and Morpheus have a similar understanding of their places on the eschatological timeline: both believe themselves to be living in the old age, but on the cusp of the new age. Both live in the wake of recent events (the resurrection of Jesus and the finding of Neo) that guarantee the nearness and certainty of the sequence of events which will usher in a new age of peace. It seems, then, that both would answer the question ‘what time is it?’ with a resounding declaration: it is the beginning of the end-time. It is the time when the cosmic battle against evil will be won. It is time to initiate the restoration wherein humans are freed from the evil that controls them. It is time to make the small city of Zion the great, peaceful civilization it was meant to be.

(iii) How did we get into this mess?

Having reached the conclusions that the people in *The Matrix* are (1) in exile and (2) soon to be delivered from this exile, we can now take a step back and ask the question of how these problematic states come to be. That is, why did the Biblical or The Matrix exile happen? On the surface, we have the simple answers that the Babylonian exile was caused by King Nebuchadnezzar and the destroyed world in *The Matrix* was due to the invention of artificial intelligence. However, these answers explain the ‘how’ of the exile, but do not offer satisfactory explanations as to the ‘why.’ At this point the question of “how did we get into this mess?” moves quickly towards the question of “how can God have allowed this to happen?” We have already explained (I.2.i) that ancient Israelite theology understood God as an ever-present reality, so active in human history that nothing ‘just happens’ in the Bible. Everything that

³³ Wright, p. 298.

happens does so for a specific reason (beyond cause and effect) and is sealed with God's approval. Thus, within ancient Israelite cosmology, the problem of evil becomes uniquely focused, because God is given the position of being primarily responsible. Though the three major prophets and Deuteronomy differ on why God will bring the restoration, they all agree that it was God who caused the exile because of the sins of the nation. Like the catastrophes of the Book of Genesis, the exile was caused by God as direct punishment for sin.

For the inhabitants of Judah, the exile did not only entail the loss of land, but on a more profoundly theological level, it seemed to lead to the inevitable conclusion that they had also been exiled from God's favor.

The idea that God is responsible for the day to day affairs of the world seems hopelessly primitive to modern sensibilities. However, even in the post-enlightenment world the problem of evil still looms as a formidable threat to the rationality of theism, and the presence of evil in the world remains a mocking specter to religious peoples' claim that there is an all-powerful, all-loving God. Even though many religious people reject the conclusion that the evil in the world is sent by God, they must still struggle to find reasons why God would allow such evil to occur. The attempt to reconcile God's goodness with the evil in the world is known as theodicy. Of course, in the wake of events such as the holocaust and countless other atrocities through the centuries, many people have rejected the whole project of theodicy and opted for the more viable option of atheism.

As an undergraduate, I devoted my senior thesis to the philosophical problem of evil, and I approached this subject as a problem in logic: i.e., is it a logical contradiction to assert that there is an all-powerful, all-loving God and that there is evil in the world? I concluded that it was not, but to reach this conclusion, I had to employ a number of well-established theodicies (such as "the free will argument" or "the argument from natural laws") that seek to reconcile God's Omni-benevolence with the evil creation. However, these philosophical theodicies are totally foreign to early Biblical theology. If there is suffering, it is the natural outcome of God's justice that both punishes the wicked and rewards the good. However, this is not to say that the concept of the suffering righteous was not understood in ancient Israelite theology. The wisdom literature (especially Job) and the apocalyptic writings of the inter-testamental period were keenly aware of the problem of the suffering righteous. Though nowhere in these writings is the conclusion reached that this suffering is due to God's loss of control. The wisdom writers simply accept it as a mystery and predicate their vindication on resurrection and/or restoration.³⁴ This will be the subject of the Section (iv) below.

³⁴ In later Christian theology, with the influence of Hellenistic philosophy (especially neo-Platonic metaphysics), this future reward came to be understood as the hereafter as the disembodied soul goes off to Heaven to live with God for eternity. However for first-century Jews and Christians vindication will happen through resurrection and restoration—which go hand in hand—in the here and now of the material, space-time world that we know. What Jews of this time hoped for was a new Jerusalem in a state of *shalom*. This non-dualistic understanding of vindication helps the case that Neo is the messiah because the deliverance he will provide will be within the space-time world that we know.

In claiming that the exile was sent by God, we must be mindful that this was not some form of gratuitous suffering inflicted by a malicious god. The exile occurred because of the people's continued apostasy and idolatry despite the warnings of the prophets. Though this idea might no longer seem theologically acceptable in the modern world, it was none the less a part of Biblical theology and we can see its parallels in the catastrophe of the year 1999 in *The Matrix*.

Though the situation of the characters in *The Matrix* is similar to the predicament faced by the exiled Israelites, the *cause* of the exile in *The Matrix* is most closely aligned to the earlier events that led to Adam and Eve's banishment from the Garden of Eden (Gen 3) and the Tower of Babel (Gen 11). In both these cases from the Book of Genesis, humans tried to better themselves by encroaching on the divine sphere.³⁵ The serpent in Genesis tells Eve to eat of the fruit of the forbidden tree which will allow her to understand good and evil (like God). Likewise, the humans in Genesis 11 attempted to build a tower that stretched into the heavens. In both of these examples, God cut down the humans because they had grown out of their intended ontological spheres and attempted to be like God.

The drive to make an artificial intelligence is a blatant attempt to be like God. As Morpheus explains, "at some point around the end of the twentieth century all of mankind was united in celebration. We marveled at our magnificence as we gave birth to AI..." The underlying anthropocentric arrogance of this sentiment is reminiscent of the statement by the builders of the Tower of Babel, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves..." (Gen 11:4a) who sought to establish for themselves a place of prominence and the same stature as God. The common accusation that a person is 'playing God' stems from the understanding that there are some things in the world best left to the divine office. The creation of artificial intelligence seems to have crossed that boundary, because the consequences are as severe as any of the punishments handed out by God in the Bible. Also, the punishment for the building of the Tower of Babel and the creation of AI are similar in that both result in being scattered across the earth (or into the earth) so that such hubris can never occur again.

In the case of the exile and the Tower of Babel incident, God punishes humans for their transgressions that have provoked this punishment. Though there is no indication that Morpheus or any other character in *The Matrix* sees the exile of the past two centuries as some sort of punishment from God, it fits the cause and effect of the exile in *The Matrix* model quite nicely. In any case, if a member of The Nebuchadnezzar's crew was asked 'how did we get into this mess?' his or her answer would echo that of a person in exile or in the town of Babel: 'it's our own fault.' (That's the bad news.)

³⁵ Some modern exegetes including Robert DiVito (see bibliography) argue against this read and claim that there is no textual basis for the assumption that humans were encroaching on God's ontological sphere. However, I do not agree with their interpretation.

(iv) How do we get out of this mess?

The good news is that the neither the Biblical story nor *The Matrix* ends with eternal punishment. The anguish of the exile is coupled with the promise of restoration. Though the Bible provides us with no unequivocal answer to the problem of evil, the overarching solution lies in the promise of future vindication through restoration and/or resurrection (which go hand in hand).³⁶ The hope of Israel was for God to reestablish the covenant and restore Zion to her former glory, which entails the *Shekinah*, the return of God's glorious presence (cf. Isa 52:8, Ezek 43).³⁷ The means through which God will establish this end often entails a messiah who will be sent to gather the lost flock of Israel and restore Zion (Isa 59:20)³⁸ Though there was no single, monolithic messianic expectation in ancient Israel, there are some generalizations that we can safely make. It was generally understood that the messiah would perform three duties. NT Wright explains: "the fundamental Jewish hope was for liberation from oppression, restoration of the land and a proper rebuilding of the Temple."³⁹

Some of the earlier prophets are fuzzy about the *person* of the messiah and are more interested in the restoration he will bring (cf. Isa 7:14). However, in later biblical writings the focus on this office of messiahship sharpens, and we arrive at a clearer picture of this person who will be of Davidic descent (Mic 5:1-3, Jer 23:1-4, Ezek 17:1-21).⁴⁰ There is no indication that these prophets envisioned this messiah to be ontologically different from an ordinary human, just that he would be imbued with the power of God. However, even this changed with later developments in eschatological hope. By the time Daniel was writing in the second century BCE, the hope for a messiah had developed into a figure sent directly by God who will come on the clouds and wreak havoc on Israel's enemies (Dan 7:13-14).

The New Testament writers believe that Jesus was the Messiah despite the fact that Jesus did not do what the messiah was expected to do which was to establish a military victory over Israel's enemies. The Gospels and Paul explain that Jesus' role was one of soteriology, and not one of earthly king. (It took a good deal of evangelical apology to get the Jews of the first century to wrap their minds around this concept because it was so dissimilar to what they expected.) However, the return of the risen Christ will fill in this gap. In the Book of Revelation, Jesus returns in glory, destroys all the enemies of God, and establishes a New Heaven and a New Earth (Rev 21). It is this role that is played by Neo, who is actually the return of an earlier person. Morpheus explains to Neo what his (Neo's) role will be:

³⁶ In the earlier prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures, resurrection was used as a metaphor for restoration (cf. Ezek 37:1-14) but from the writing of Daniel through the inter-testamental writings and culminating in the New Testament, resurrection became a literal hope because it was tied to the vindication of the righteous and the martyrs.

³⁷ Wright, p. 269.

³⁸ The controversy over the Zionist movement after World War Two stemmed from the fact that some Orthodox Jews believed that it is only the duty of the Messiah to establish a Jewish homeland and that humans taking this on themselves was blatant apostasy.

³⁹ Wright, p. 299.

⁴⁰ DeLong in *ABD*, p. 780.

When The Matrix was first built there was a man born inside of it who could 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 prophesized his return and that his coming will [1] hail the destruction of The Matrix, [2] end the war, [3] bring freedom to our people. (numeration added)

Notice how the three duties of the One, as predicted by Morpheus, match the messianic responsibilities as anticipated by ancient Israel. In this way Neo precisely fits the role of the messiah. Though this was not the role played by Jesus, it is the role that will be played by the risen Christ predicted in Revelation 18-21 and the messiah in Daniel 7. Neo will be the stone thrown by Daniel that brings down the great empire of oppression (Dan 2:1-45).

While the course of Neo's life in *The Matrix* follows that of Jesus, the eschatological role he plays is closer to that of the risen Christ of Revelation and the Davidic messiah executed by Israel. Neo will succeed where others have failed because he is the One chosen (by God) to redeem Zion by defeating the enemies who hold it down (Ps110; 1Cor15:20-28). All of the other would-be messiahs had failed because they were not the One; they did not have the divinely sanctioned blessing of God. The prophets and Morpheus agree that it is the messiah, and the messiah alone, who will get us out of this mess.

(v) Why will it end?

If the exile happened as a result of God's disfavor with humanity, then the restoration will happen when sin has been forgiven (cf. 4Ezra 6:17-25 et al). Because the exile was a physical symptom of a theological sickness (God's disfavor), the Israelites' hope for restoration was a longing not only for a return to the land, but for a return to God, who had cast them away in anger. As NT Wright explains, "Jews of this time were hoping for the 'real' return from exile. They were also looking for a full 'forgiveness of sins.' Those are not two separate things, but two ways of looking at the same thing."⁴¹ This hope for forgiveness and the eternal favor of God which will come with this forgiveness were at the root of Israel's hope for restoration.

The major prophets hold different opinions as to why God will bring about the restoration, but none believes that it is conditioned upon some action on behalf of the people. The restoration will happen when God decides that the people have served their time. Though *when* the restoration will happen is up to God, *that* the restoration will happen is certain. In the Hebrew scriptures God makes a number of promises to His people which are irreversible. After God destroys the world with the flood, He promises Noah that He will never destroy the world again (Gen 9:11). God strengthens this covenant again when He promises to make a great nation of Abraham whose offering of Isaac is the original down payment of Israel's loyalty to God. The events of The Book of Exodus and the giving of the law further strengthen God's bond with Israel. Finally, God's promise to David that one of his line will always rule (2Sam 7:16) leads to the expectation that the messiah will come from the house of David.

⁴¹ Wright, p. 320.

Just as Jews believe that God's eternal favor on Israel is grounded in the *Akedah* (= binding of Isaac), Christians believe that Jesus' self-offering redeemed humanity. We see this idea developed most clearly in Pauline theology wherein Jesus' willing self-sacrifice redeems humanity and undoes the sins of Adam. For Paul, Jesus is the new Adam whose resurrection will usher in the new age of peace and ontological correctness where God's reign is immanent and unchallenged (1Cor15:20-28, Ps 110).

We can see a link between sacrifice and restoration/resurrection in *The Matrix*. Neo's mission to save Morpheus was a sacrificial mission to save all of humanity by preventing the codes of Zion from getting into the wrong hands. His self-sacrifice is rewarded by his resurrection, which, in turn, will lead to the salvation of all the humans; without the risen Neo, The Matrix cannot be destroyed. Thus, Neo's self-sacrifice is related to Jesus' self-sacrifice and Abraham's offering of Isaac, because all three of these events had cosmic repercussions as guarantees of the salvation and restoration of human kind. These events are each parts of the divine plan for salvation. The Oracle understood this plan and, as Morpheus said, told Neo exactly what he needed to hear.

God's forgiveness of humanity, which is part and parcel of the restoration, therefore happened in and through Neo's sacrifice. It is due to the self-sacrifice of Neo that the exile of *The Matrix* will end.

(vi) What will the world be like after the restoration?

What the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament seem to have envisioned in the restored world is the combination of God's abiding presence and eternal peace. The details vary from text to text but there is a general understanding among the prophets that in the new age peace will abound (because Zion's enemies have been destroyed) and God will be an ever-present reality. Jerusalem/Zion will no longer be a vassal city controlled by a foreign empire but will be the new seat of God's kingdom on earth. Professor Jon Levenson understands this new creation as a uniting of the two parallel spheres of the heavenly and earthly Jerusalem.⁴² The author of the Book of Revelation takes the idea of the New Jerusalem one step further and predicts that there will be no need for a temple in the New Jerusalem because God will be immanently present within the whole of the new creation (Rev 21).

There is widespread agreement among all of the major and minor prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures and the inter-testamental writings that the reality of current problems will be totally washed away by the coming of the new age. Restoration, forgiveness, vindication, and resurrection are all different aspects of the new creation that will undo all of the difficulties of the present age. However, it cannot be over emphasized that none of these writings (*i.e.* neither the Jewish prophets nor most of the New Testament) envision an end to the space-time world.⁴³ There will be an end to the present world order, but this will happen within history as we know it. The kingdom of God was expected to happen within the world as an earthly reality like a new Genesis. Its establishment will bring a new covenant, and the idea that it will need any sort of an earthly ruler—be it Babylon, Egypt, Rome, Herod, or an artificial intelligence—is antithetical to the theocratic principle of 'no king but God.'

⁴² Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, p. 141.

⁴³ 2Peter is an exception.

We do not get to witness the new world in *The Matrix* because it is beyond the scope of this movie; the new age is about to be established just as the credits begin to roll. However, in Neo's last lines, we glimpse elements of a new creation, especially the new covenant expected by Jeremiah and Deuteronomy:

I know that 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 to tell you how this is going to end. I came to tell you how it will begin. I'm going to hang up this phone. And when I do 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 borders or boundaries. A world without rules or controls. A world where anything is possible.

Like the new creation expected by the prophets, Neo's restoration will not bring an end to the space-time world. Rather, Neo will end the current world order and establish a new covenant not constricted by the rigid rules of a computer system. The post-exilic hope for the establishment of the kingdom of God was simply the hope that someday God will rule the world without a human intermediary. Just as in Revelation there is no need for a temple because God is present, so too will the Kingdom of God not need an earthly king. Zion was intended to have been a kingdom of God but the people, in their practical understanding of realpolitik, demanded an earthly king (1Samual). The New Jerusalem will not make this mistake and will truly be a kingdom of God; so will the new world of *The Matrix*.

(vii) Where is God?

Having now answered six questions about eschatology in *The Matrix* we can now turn to this originally posed question, 'where is God?' The answer to this question changes throughout the film. In the beginning of the film and during the 200 years prior, God has been absent. But by the end of the narrative, God has returned.

The first of these realities, that God is absent, was a feeling held by the exilics of the sixth century BCE. NT Wright explains that for these people, "the present age was a time when the creator God seemed to have been hiding His face."⁴⁴ The feeling of abandonment by God is quite common for people undergoing suffering (Isa 54:8). This sentiment was uttered by Job's wife, who encouraged her husband to curse God and die" (Job 2:9) and was also held by the author of Psalm 22 who wrote the line (later made famous by Jesus' reiteration of it) "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Ps 22:1).

⁴⁴ Wright, p. 299.

The feeling that ‘God is not with us or else this could not have happened’ was surely felt by the people in the year 2000 of *The Matrix* just as it was felt by the exilics and others who have undergone intense suffering.⁴⁵ It is a likely scenario that if humanity had to undergo 200 years of exile and slavery that the people would reach a unanimous conclusion that God was dead. If the word “God” had not totally fallen away from language as a meaningless concept, its mention would probably be an aggravating reminder of how naive the humans of old were about the fate of the world. For Morpheus’s crew living in the year 2199, God was a belief of people long ago, and these people must have been wrong because this God, if there ever were such a being, has been absent for two centuries. Yet during the last moments of the film, in a very subtle way, God reappears. In fact, as I will show, God breaks into the action of the film a second and third time, in case the audience members missed this first appearance. The script provides us with all the cues we need to figure these out.

As the action of the film progresses it becomes clear the Neo is the last hope of humanity. Other would-be messiahs have been tested and failed. The crew is getting impatient, and Cypher is ready to throw in the towel for the whole human race. Yet right when doubt reaches its high-water mark as Cypher is about to wipe out what is left of the human race by turning over Zion, God returns to the drama. In a twist of irony, it is Cypher’s cue that it would “take a miracle” to stop him when suddenly Tank gets up and stops Cypher. (Enter God, stage left.) Later, as Neo is about to go back into *The Matrix* to rescue Morpheus, Tank asks, “so what do you need, besides a miracle?” Sure enough this miracle is granted and Morpheus comes back alive. Finally, as it seems that all is lost in the final seconds of the movie, before activating the EMP as sentinels are about to destroy everyone aboard the *Nebuchadnezzar*, Neo comes back to life and the day is saved. All three of these events are true miracles, unexplainable without God’s renewed favor.

The motif of a hero abandoning his people and then suddenly reappearing at the last moment to save the day is a cinematic convention⁴⁶ which, in a very subtle way, has been employed here by the Wachowski Brothers regarding the presence of God.

Though the people in *The Matrix* seem to be atheistic in that they betray no knowledge or belief in God, the film itself is deeply theistic in that it tells of the exilics returning to Zion. Or, to be more precise, Zion returning to its intended place on earth. Without God acting in the wings, it is impossible to explain Neo’s resurrection and the other miraculous events of the film. Where did the “One” come from if not God? How could the Oracle have known what was coming without being in touch with a divine plan for salvation? God may have “hidden His face” for the two centuries proceeding the plot of *The Matrix*, but as of the finding of Neo, God returns and the restoration begins. Zion, which is currently buried underground, will soon be resurrected and restored to new life due to the intervention of the One who has been sent by God. The remaining few human survivors in *The Matrix* are like the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37, the last remnants of what once was. It is with these building blocks that God will make humanity anew, free of the oppression of *The Matrix*.

The long awaited restoration is at hand.

⁴⁵ For especially powerful accounts of apostasy and faithfulness in the face of intense evil see Schilling, pp. 13-54.

⁴⁶ For one example of many, Han Solo pulls this trick in *Star Wars*.

Conclusion

It has not been my intention in this paper to argue that *The Matrix* is a subtle evangelical attempt on the part of the Wachowski brothers to inject religious ideas into the popular psyche or even to suggest that the Wachowski brothers are some sort of anonymous Christians. To claim that *The Matrix* is a “Christian movie” would be to ignore the fact that it is replete with myriad other ancient religious and philosophical ideas, most of which are decidedly not Christian. I have not gone into any details of these since they are not integral to the thesis of this paper but one could easily have written different papers which view *The Matrix* through the lens of Gnosticism, Berkeley’s metaphysics, Buddhism, Pythagorean numerology, Neo-Platonism, and, no doubt, countless others.

It is interesting to note that during an online chat, the Wachowski brothers were asked “are all the religious symbolism [sic] and doctrine thought throughout the movie intentional or not?” to which they responded, “most of it was intentional.”⁴⁷ However, I will not make too much of this point because I believe that it ultimately does not matter if the religious motifs that have been discussed for the previous pages were added “intentionally” or not.⁴⁸ I agree with the post-modern literary critics who posit that artists are influenced by “floating signifiers” which are ideas (such as the theme of exile and restoration) that permeate culture and are waiting to be digested and reused in a new way. It is highly possible that the Wachowski brothers felt that the (secular) motifs of restoration and new creation are themes that would resonate well with their target audience. They turned out to have been right.

The last question we have to address in this paper is: why did the Wachowski Brothers choose to tell this particular story? That is, why combine the disparate vehicles of a quasi-religious story with high-speed ultraviolence? Would it not have been easier to simply choose one or the other? The answer is that the Wachowski brothers know their audience. Few young people today are interested in watching a Charlton Heston epic about the Bible. The excessive violence in the film is included for the same reason that farmers have to annually increase the strength of pesticides: young people have been so anesthetized by violence and irreverence that the only way to speak to the young movie-going public today is to up those standards by using cooler effects to make things sexier and faster or else nobody cares. For this reason, the blistering pace of the action scenes is something one *has* to include to reach a wide audience; innocuous films do not command much publicity.⁴⁹ Yet, it is not the action or effects that sustain the enduring popularity of this movie. The action scenes in *Terminator 2* are just as exciting—and *T2* even has the apocalyptic motif of a man from the destroyed future coming back to warn us to turn back from our drive to make artificial intelligence. Yet I have not heard

⁴⁷ Text of this conversation available at <http://awesomhouse.com/matrix>.

⁴⁸ Again, I distinguish between the Biblical allusions of Part One of this paper and the eschatological subtext of Part Two in that I believe that while the bits in part One are intentionally added to the film, the larger themes explained in Part Two were included without the authors’ explicit intent. However, I have no empirical evidence for this judgement because I have no idea what, if any, religious convictions are held by the Wachowski brothers. Judging from the explicit Gospel allusions drawn out in Part One of this paper, I suspect that they have had some exposure to Biblical studies, though this in no way entails any sort of religious belief—Christian or otherwise.

⁴⁹ Even *American Beauty*, which swept the Academy Awards this past year, did so by pushing the envelope of what is acceptable for an adult film.

anyone even mention this movie since it closed in theaters and it has certainly not moved many people to devote a paper topic or a website to it. The instant cult status of *The Matrix*, is, I believe, due to the above mentioned sub-text of exilic restoration and the fulfillment of eschatological hope which, in a roundabout way, speaks to its audience.

What is essential to realize about the concept of restoration is that the desire is not to make things like they were, but to make things how they are meant to be. The hope of getting things back as they were is reactionary—like Jay Gatsby’s dream of reliving his past. The eschatological hope for restoration is for *radical newness*, a complete reversal of the evil present—this is the scenario that Isaiah and Revelation predict. Moreover, this is the hope of the exilics.

This relates to *The Matrix* because its target audience, the 18-35 year old movie-going middle class, are the members of Generation Exile. The idea that there is another way that things can be resonates well with us. Every vacuous hour of MTV, every superficial fashion magazine, every dot com telling us to “click here!” further alienates us from any scrap of an idea that might lend some sort of transcendent or enduring meaning to our allotted eighty years. We have tried dying our hair, piercing our bodies and moving to California, but nothing seems to endure. We long for something meaningful, whole and new.

Though the Book of Revelation was written to Christian communities facing persecution from Roman authorities, its message of patient endurance —hold on, for the end is near and soon we will all soon be vindicated— is still widely popular with contemporary audiences who live under the yoke of oppression.⁵⁰ Similarly, the Battle Hymn of the Republic, which is shot-through with Biblical apocalyptic imagery, was sung by soldiers as they marched into battle in the Civil War because the promise that their war will someday be over was an empowering and revitalizing message.

In contemporary American society, as the stakes are lower, so too are the hopes for radical newness. However, for people imprisoned in office cubicles everywhere, the satire of *Dilbert* is embraced as a statement of their Sisyphus-like existence. It is popular because it explains the existential anxiety that can build up while doing meaningless work for a large corporation.

⁵⁰ Leonard Boff in *Systematic Theology*, p. 17.

Young people watching *The Matrix* might notice that the cubicles they occupy at work bear a remarkable similarity to the pods in the power plant of *The Matrix*. They might think that the stale coffee they are served is the equivalent of the liquefied dead which is intravenously fed to sustain the billions of human slaves who power The Matrix with their body heat. Likewise, dress down Fridays, two weeks of paid vacation and stock options are there for the same reason that The Matrix itself was created: “What is the Matrix? Control. The Matrix is a computer generated dream world built to keep us under control in order to change a human being into this.....”



It is not a coincidence that Thomas Anderson's boss at The MetaCortex Corporation has the same haircut as Agent Smith, and that the squeak made by the window washers is the same sound that Neo's hand makes against the glass as he is sucked out of his pod. The agents who enforce the tyranny of The Matrix are not entirely different from Mr. Reinhardt, who bawls Neo out and keeps him penned up in that little cubical in his gray-on-gray office. The idea that there is another possibility, that by “freeing our minds” we can become spiritually enlightened and escape this prison, is a very attractive prospect to us modern-day exilics. As Kurt Vonnegut points out, these are the bare bones of a story that will be popular with young people everywhere.

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