

Gnostics in *The Matrix*

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by Steve Kellmeyer

Two women lead the young man into a dusty, poorly-lit room. The furnishings are simple: two chairs and a table. Near the table stands a dark-skinned man. The young man had prepared for, longed for this meeting for quite some time. Finally, he was about to meet the man he had known only by legend and rumor. The darker man motions towards a chair and both take a seat at the table. The dark man begins.

“You want to know the answers to your questions,”

The younger man nods warily.

“I can reveal them to you. Are you ready to learn?”

“The young man nods again.

“The world has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth. You are a slave, born into bondage, living in a dream world...” As the man continues his revelations, the young man leans in close, drinking in every word.

Artificial reality, the building of dream worlds, lies at the very heart of the modern movie industry, but Hollywood did not originate the idea. Millennia before movie technology existed, the idea of artificial reality, of a dream world built for men, informed the lives of thousands of men and women throughout the Near East. The scene above is a composite drawn from the experiences of those men and women, members of the Roman Empire whose philosophy seriously threatened Christianity almost from her birth. Hollywood took the philosophy and shows us what it looks like when it is placed firmly into our time. .

Remember when Hollywood produced wonderfully Catholic films, like *Going My Way*? Times change. The wild success of the *Star Wars* series began a Hollywood trend in alternate theologies which has recently become quite sophisticated, most especially in the cult favorite *The Matrix*. Few realize that much of *The Matrix*'s appeal lies in the quasi-Christian themes tightly woven into the plot, a plot which actually provides an excellent model for understanding the ancient Christian heresy called Gnosticism. While there were almost as many variations of Gnosticism, a word which means "the knowledge," as there were Gnostics, their overall theology had a set of core beliefs from which all Gnostics drew. Larry and Andy Wachowski, the brothers who wrote the script, did a technically superb job of presenting these core belief in a dynamically visual setting. But in order to see how they accomplished this, we must first know something about Gnostics.

Gnosticism flourished in the first and second century, and has experienced a certain resurgence in recent years. According to Gnostics, the Godhead is not a Trinity of persons, rather, it is a collection of roughly thirty or so spiritual entities called *aeons*. Together, these *aeons* comprise the *pleroma*, the Fullness, which is the Gnostic term for the Godhead. One of the *aeons* in the *pleroma*, an aeon named Sophia ("wisdom") generated a spiritual being of great power, but small intelligence, who thought he was the ultimate God. This being took a portion of the *pleroma*'s divine essence and with it fashioned the whole of the created world, along with *archons*, spiritual rulers of the world. This work earned him the name Demiurgos, which means "semi-Creator."

Because the Demiurgos was not too bright; he created a flawed world. Selfish and cruel, he trapped human souls by enclosing them in flesh and keeping them in the

prison we call Creation. Every human being knowingly or unknowingly serves this false god. According to the Gnostics, the God of the Old Testament and the God of Creation is the Demiurgos, whose attributes are clearly shown in the nastiness God displays in the Old Testament.

Sophia, seeing what happened, tried to free the first human beings, Adam and Eve. While Adam and Eve were in the garden, Sophia entered a serpent and, speaking through the serpent, told Adam and Eve that they could attain to the godhead, but only if they made contact with the divine spark which rests within each human being. Adam passed this knowledge on to his son Seth, and it continues to be passed on through each generation. Meanwhile, other *aeons* have been sent to inform us of the true nature of divinity, the last and greatest speaking through Jesus. Jesus was an ordinary man, but one of the *aeons*, an *aeon* named *Christ*, spoke through him in order to tell us how to free ourselves.

Gnostic teaching relies heavily on myth and mythic images. According to Gnostics, the necessary knowledge for salvation is primarily formed by our direct experience of the world and the experience of the revealed knowledge about our spiritual origin. The world around us distracts us from the truth of who we are by intoxicating us with falsehoods. We can be freed from these falsehoods by Messengers of Light, who teach and who establish salvific mysteries (sacraments) which put us in contact with our true selves.

Given this world-view, *The Matrix*, clearly unfolds as a modern re-telling of the Gnostic version of salvation history. From the opening credits to the closing scene, a

complex interweave of pagan myth and Christian symbol is used to create the Gnostic world-view right before our eyes.

Water, a reminder of baptism, is a constant theme. Thus, we see a waterfall digital display in the opening credits, which cuts to a pitch-dark room where we meet the woman we will later know as “Trinity,” important because Trinity is the name of one of the Gnostic *aeons*. Trinity is in contact with Morpheus, a man named for the Greek god of sleep and dreams. Because Trinity is in serious danger in this opening scene, Morpheus directs her to the corner of Lake and Wells (subtle, aren’t they?), so that she may be saved from agents who are trying to capture her.. Throughout the movie, the agents will play the role of the *archons*, the rulers of this present world, while Trinity’s boss and her friends represent the Messengers of Light. She is chased by agents in a dump truck (reminding us of what flawed Creation really is), and is saved by literally being called out of this created world when she answers a ringing phone.

The rest of the movie can be divided into fairly clean segments: the Call, the New Adam, the Last Supper, the Oracle, the Passion/Descent into Hell/Death, and finally the Resurrection/Ascension. Within each segment, symbols and imagery are used to foreshadow coming segments and summarize preceding segments.

In the first segment, “The Call”, we are introduced to the protagonist, Neo, whose name is an anagram of “One” (as in “The One”) and means “new” in Greek. He is asleep at a computer screen filled with news of Morpheus, thus foreshadowing what will soon be revealed: he is in a dreamworld. After an interesting computer screen conversation, Neo assists a character named Troy whose three-minute role serves to tell us who Neo is: “Hallelujah, you’re my saviour, man, my own personal Jesus Christ.”

Neo soon meets Trinity, who warns him of impending danger, and tells him Morpheus, who Neo is looking for, will find him. Waking up at 9:18 (the movie tends to reference the Gospel of Mark, the verses foreshadowing events in the next segment), he is late for work the next morning, which gives his employer the chance to paraphrase 1 Cor 12:26, reminding him, "The employees understand that they are part of a whole. If an employee has a problem, the company has a problem." Immediately afterwards, the employee finds he has a problem. Neo is given a new cell phone through which Morpheus, acting as his guide, calls him, warning him that agents are even now searching the building for him. He is told to "get on the [window-washer's] scaffold and go to the roof," a reference to the scaffold of the Cross upon which Jesus is raised. He refuses to follow this guidance and is consequently captured by three agents, who subject him to Trial.

These three persons (subtle, aren't they?) interrogate him and, in a rather horrific scene reminiscent of the demon-possessed boy of Mark 9:18, plant a tracking device on him. During this interrogation, we discover that Neo's full name is Thomas A. Anderson. Any viewer would recognize the doubting Thomas reference, but only the careful viewer knows "Anderson" means "son of man." We also hear the agent mimic Caiaphas in John 11:48, by unconsciously prophesying about Neo, saying that one of the two lives he is living has a future while the other does not. We will soon find out how literally true this is.

The story now enters the New Adam sequence. Our doubting Thomas is told to go to Adams street, where he meets Trinity under a bridge from which water pours in sheets. Together, they pass through the water and Neo agrees to meet with Morpheus.

Trinity is able to remove the tracking device (the demon, cf. Mark 9:18), and they enter a building with chessboard tiles where Morpheus meets him. We hear Duke Ellington's "I'm Beginning to See the Light" play in the background. In an unusual amalgam of Alice's Wonderland and Adam in the Garden of Eden, Neo is asked to eat a forbidden pill in order to move to the next level. As he contemplates his choice, the first part of Gnostic philosophy is revealed to him: "The world has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth... You are a slave, born into bondage... How would you know the difference between the dream world and the real world?" Morpheus explains that words are insufficient. In order to know the truth, Neo must experience it, see it for himself. After eating the pill, Neo enters a mirror which is "c-c-cold [as death]" and which does, indeed, bring him to cardiac arrest, the first death. This is a harbinger of the baptism in which he quickly finds himself, for he awakens in a womb-like bath of liquid, surrounded by snake-like cables in a totally different existence (cf. Rom 6:4). He is rescued from the waters by Morpheus, who greets him with the words "Welcome to the real world," and who then re-builds (re-creates) his body.

Neo soon finds that he is on a hovercraft, the Nebuchadnezzar, named after the Old Testament king of Babylon who destroyed Jerusalem, burned down the Temple, and sent the Hebrews into exile. He learns that the ship model is Mark 3, No. 11 (Mark 3:11), and he is introduced to the crew. Of these, the most notable are Cypher, a take-off on the name Lucifer, who will betray Neo and Morpheus, and Dozer and Tank, brothers born in the last human city, Zion, the source of everyone's hope.

Neo discovers that the Matrix is a computer-generated dreamworld, built so men could be enslaved and serve the computer which created it. This is a very close

description of the Gnostic understanding - the *pleroma* (men) created an (artificial intelligence) entity who in turn creates an intentionally flawed "reality." Human beings are now trapped in this false reality and must be freed. Neo learns that there was once a man born inside the Matrix who learned how to control the artificial reality, doing whatever he wanted. He freed the first men and taught them the truth. The Oracle prophesied that at this man's return, all would be freed from bondage. Thus, these freed men and women now free others, looking for the One. Neo discovers that Morpheus believes him to be the One (the New Adam). Morpheus, again acting as guide, spends the next several scenes trying to free Neo's mind so that Neo can operate as the saviour he is. As this budding Jesus Christ rests between training sessions, Trinity feeds him.

Following the New Adam segment, we see an extended paraphrase of the Last Supper. Cypher is on duty to watch the Matrix displays. Startled by Neo, Cypher exclaims "Neo, you scared the bejesus out of me" (subtle, aren't they?) and then shares a drink with him. In the very next scene, Cypher is in the Matrix eating an excellent meal with the agents and promising to betray Zion, Morpheus and Neo. The scene following shows Neo eating with his friends, the hovercraft crewmen.

With the completion of the meal sequence, Neo is now ready to go to the Oracle and find out who he really is. The team enter the Matrix, the false world which Neo formerly inhabited, and Cypher immediately begins their betrayal. Meanwhile, Neo is told that the Oracle is not right or wrong, but merely a guide. Morpheus and Neo enter an elevator and rise to where the Oracle lives. As he waits for her, Neo is told to realize

the truth - this reality does not exist. The Oracle meets him, gives a cryptic welcome, and warns of a coming choice.

As the team tries to leave the Matrix, they discover they have been betrayed. This begins the Passion and Descent into Hell segment. Some of the crew, including Neo, escape by descending down the walls into the sewers and running to a TV repair shop (a metaphor for the fact that Neo is trying to repair the world of illusion humans live) so they can be called out of the Matrix. Meanwhile, the captured Morpheus is tortured while one of the agents explain that the computer intentionally created a flawed world because human beings didn't seem to thrive in any other kind. The agent drives home the point by referring to reality as "this zoo, this prison," throwing in a few modernist references to overpopulation and the cancer of humanity upon the earth. The crew members who successfully escape sadly believe that Morpheus, "the father to us," must inevitably be killed. This corresponds to a variant of Gnosticism in which the Propater, the Father figure in the pleroma who is threatened by the Demiurgos, is saved by the Christ. Thus, we are not surprised to see that Neo decides to save Morpheus.

Neo and Trinity together set out to save Morpheus. During this extremely violent project, the witness of an agent concerning Neo ("Only human") is contrasted with the witness of Tank concerning Neo ("He's the One!", paraphrasing the centurion in Mark 15:39). Successful, Morpheus, Trinity and Neo head for State and Balboa, whose subway station has a phone line out of the Matrix. Balboa was the European who discovered the Pacific Ocean, so we can expect Neo will here begin to accept the real "state" of things, the ocean of power he possesses, and we are not disappointed. After an extended subterranean fight with an agent, Neo is directed to Wabash and Lake,

where the ringing phone, the call to salvation, will be found in the Heart of the City Hotel, Room 303: combined references to baptism, the eternal Trinity, and salvation in the Sacred Heart. In room 303, he is shot to death by an agent before he can answer the call.

However, the love of Trinity in Nebuchadnezzar's real world is sufficient to raise him from the dead both in reality and in the illusion which is the Matrix. When he rises from the dead, he finds he has full control of the Matrix and easily defeats the three persons (agents). The movie ends as Neo picks up a pay phone within the Matrix (he paid for our sins) and tells the artificial intelligence, "I will show these people a world with no rules, no controls, borders, or boundaries. A world without you. What happens next is up to you." Neo then flies (ascends) into the heavens.

While several liberties had to be taken with the original Gnostic story in order to make it fit Hollywood's format, the movie outlines the essentials of this earliest of Christian heresies. We live in an illusion, creation is an evil prison in which we serve its creator, and we must be freed. The careful attention to symbolic detail throughout the movie (the script went through seventeen re-writes), combined with the nearly constant paraphrasing of Scriptural concepts or stories serves to magnify the power of the presentation. *The Matrix* is only the first of a three-part series, with *Matrix II* and *III* being filmed back-to-back even as you read this. Will the sequels continue their re-telling of the ancient heresy, or will they degenerate into a couple of mindless shoot-em-ups, lacking the technical skill and intentional message of the original? Only one thing is for sure - at this rate, it will be a long time before we see a sequel to *The Bells of St. Mary's*.