Avatar and the Longing for Eden

Dr. Patrick Zukeran examines the blockbuster movie from a biblical perspective, identifying reasons for why this movie resonated with so many people despite its false worldview of pantheism.

Introduction



James Cameron's hit movie *Avatar* ranks as a ground-breaking epoch. This movie features new technology and special effects that make it landmark fantasy film, joining the elite group of movies which include *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Star Wars*, and *Lord of the Rings.*

What accounts for the tremendous popularity of this movie? I believe the cutting edge technology, combined with the strong environmental message, stirred the hearts of people throughout the world. I believe the movie also awakened a deep longing in all of us for Eden.

In *Avatar* we are projected into the twenty-second century and enter the alien world of Pandora, a spectacular tropical paradise inhabited by the ten foot tall, blue skinned Na'vi. Through innovative 3-D technology, we are immersed into experiencing this stunning paradise in vivid detail as never before encountered in cinema.

CNN news reported that after the movie, numerous fans experienced depression and even suicidal thoughts as they reflected on the present state of our planet and longed for the paradise of Pandora. Several websites included hundreds of entries from individuals who expressed their sense of loss and regret. In Pandora many saw a paradise that was lost, or one

that can never be attained on this earth.

An individual identified as Ivar Hill wrote on one of the Avatar forum sites: “When I woke up this morning after watching *Avatar* for the first time yesterday, the world seemed . . . gray. It was like my whole life, everything I’ve done and worked for, lost its meaning,” Hill wrote on the forum. “It just seems so . . . meaningless. I still don’t really see any reason to keep . . . doing things at all. I live in a dying world.”{1}

What accounts for this deep longing that was aroused by this movie? I believe within all people there is a longing for Eden, a pristine paradise where mankind and nature live in perfect harmony. Where does this longing of Eden derive from?

In Genesis God created a perfect world in which sin was not present. Man and woman lived in a beautiful and perfect world free from the effects and decay of sin. After the fall, this paradise was lost and the effects of sin began to tear apart God’s good creation. Since then, man has sought to recover what was lost. However, can we ever regain what was lost? How should we view our environment now in this fallen world? Should we resign ourselves to living in a dying world or is there a message of hope? Can we attain Eden or is it forever lost?

In this article I will discuss the pantheist and biblical environmental message and the future hope of Eden restored.

Paradise Lost

In the movie *Avatar*, we are projected into the twenty-second century and arrive on the planet Pandora, a beautiful tropical paradise of glimmering trees and psychedelic colored flowers. There are crystal rivers and breathtaking floating mountains in the clouds. Here the Na’vi live in harmony with the animals and nature.

What made *Avatar* special was that through cutting edge 3-D technology, we could encounter this world in a deeper and richer way. The movie awakened in many the longing for a paradise. I believe this longing is rooted in the Genesis account of creation. Man had a paradise but it was lost through a great tragedy. What was Eden and what was lost in the beginning?

In Genesis 1, God creates the universe out of nothing. The length of time or age of the universe is not the issue in this article. Whichever position you may hold on the age of the earth, we should all agree that the Genesis account explains how the sovereign God brings order out of the chaos and creates a masterpiece. He sets the stars and galaxies in place. He produces plant life and vegetation. He then creates animal life on land and in the oceans. The pinnacle of creation is man and woman whom He creates in His image. At the end of chapter one, God reflects upon His creation and states that " . . . it was very good."

In chapter 2:8-9 the text reads, "Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food." The text reveals that Eden was a beautiful and lush paradise which was untarnished by sin or its effects. Man lived in harmony with nature and the animals in garden.

The text also states that the trees of Eden were pleasing to the eye and good for food. Eden was a place of wonder and tremendous beauty. What was most significant is that man lived in a perfect fellowship with his companion, woman, and they both lived in a perfect relationship with their creator.

In Genesis 3, the greatest tragedy in history takes place. Through man's disobedience, sin enters into the created order. From Genesis 3 on, we witness the effects of sin infiltrate God's good creation. Sin disrupts the harmony in all aspects

of God's creation. The perfect relationship between God and man is disrupted. The perfect relationship between man and woman is broken and now they live in distrust of one another. The harmony between man and the created order also comes to an end. The power of sin and death have taken its toll on creation but will these forces ever be defeated? Will the curse of sin ever be ended?

Stewardship Over the Earth

The appeal of the hit movie *Avatar* was not only its technology but its strong environmentalist message. In the story, the blue skinned Na'vi live in perfect harmony with their environment. This harmony is made possible when the Na'vi become one with Eywa, the "all mother." Eywa is not a personal being but the impersonal force of nature made up of all things. Eywa is ever present in all things and all things are a part of Eywa. At death, the life energy in all things returns to Eywa. Her energy is concentrated in a large sacred tree located in the middle of the forest. The Na'vi attain enlightenment when they attach their ponytails to one of her vines. The Na'vi also achieve oneness with the animals as well when they attach their pony tails to similar features on the creatures they seek to domesticate.

Avatar presents the worldview of pantheism, and the environmentalist message is wrapped up in this worldview. In pantheistic religions, "salvation" and restoration comes when man attains oneness with the universe. This oneness is achieved through meditation and the altering of one's consciousness. Harmony with the environment and healing to mankind will come when mankind attains oneness with Mother Earth. Many have responded to the pantheistic religions such as the New Age movement because of their environmentalist message. Today, there is a heightened awareness and attention being paid to our environment. Pantheists care for the environment because they view man and nature as one, therefore

man is of equal value to the animals and the plants. In pantheism, man worships nature or Mother Earth. Nature is valuable because all the universe and mankind are one in essence.

Does the Christian worldview present an environmentalist message? It certainly does, but very few are aware of or hear the Christian environmentalist message. At a time when so much attention is on the environment, it is unfortunate that the Christian message is not being promoted effectively. The Bible teaches a great deal about the relationship between man and the environment.

Unlike pantheism, the Bible teaches that God created the universe but is independent of it and not dependent on it. He rules and sustains the universe. God created man alone in his image and delegated to man stewardship over the earth. Man is to guard and care for God's creation. Having dominion over the earth does not give us the freedom to misuse the earth's resources or be careless in managing the environment.

We are not to exploit the earth as the humans portrayed in *Avatar* sought to, nor are we to worship the earth as the Na'vi worshipped their "all mother." Instead, the Bible teaches that we rule over the earth, but as wise stewards who exercise care and guardianship over what God has created. The Bible does indeed offer the best environmentalist message.

Paradise Restored

Can paradise be restored? In the movie *Avatar*, the Na'vi lived in a tropical paradise on the planet Pandora. Many who saw the movie were awed by the beauty of the planet Pandora but disgusted when they reflected on the state of our planet today. On an Avatar blog site Ivar Hill wrote, "One can say my depression was twofold: I was depressed because I really wanted to live in Pandora, which seemed like such a perfect

place, but I was also depressed and disgusted with the sight of our world, what we have done to Earth. I so much wanted to escape reality."{2}

The pantheists' hope is reflected in *Avatar*. Pantheist religions like the New Age teach that when enough of mankind is enlightened, the forces of the universe will respond and restore paradise on earth. In Genesis 1 and 2, man once lived in paradise in Eden, but this was lost in Genesis 3. Will paradise ever be restored or have we lost Eden forever?

The Bible teaches that we all look forward to that day when creation will be restored. In Romans 8:18-22 Paul states,

> The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

In this passage Paul exhorts Christians to patiently endure the suffering they presently face for there is a glorious future awaiting the believer. One day not only the Christian, but creation also will be transformed and delivered from the present state which is in subjection to decay as a result of sin. At this time all creation experiences frustration and incompleteness as we await this coming transformation.{3}

The Bible promises that paradise will be restored—not by the work of man or an enlightened mind, but through the return of the King of Creation. When Christ returns, He will defeat evil and then Revelation 21:1 promises that there will be a new heaven and a new earth, for the old earth which was under the curse of sin is done away.

The message of hope presented by the Bible is not limited to

an individual hope of one’s eternal salvation. It is a message of hope for all mankind and for all of creation.

Until Creation is Restored

The new 3-D experience of the pristine paradise of Pandora and the strong environmentalist message of the movie Avatar, stirred the hearts of many people to appreciate and preserve the natural beauty that we have on earth. Avatar wrapped its environmentalist message in the worldview of pantheism. The solution to the environmental problem is enlightenment to true reality. Man is one with all of nature, thus lowering the value of man, making him equal to the plants and animals. When enough people attain enlightenment, there is hope that restoration will come to our planet.

The Bible teaches that one day the world will be transformed and paradise will one day be restored when the king of creation returns. Until that day comes, what are Christians called to do in regards to the environment?

As mentioned previously, man was given dominion over the earth. We are to use the resources of the earth to improve our lives in our struggle against the curse of sin and death. However, we are stewards of God’s creation and we are commanded to exercise great care over the earth. Throughout the Bible, God commands believers to care for the land. Here are a few examples.

In Leviticus 25, God commands His people to sow the fields for six years but in the seventh year, they must not sow but to give the land rest. In Deuteronomy 22:1-12, God commands His people to care for the animals, both domesticated and the wild animals that live in the land. Therefore, if anyone should have a strong environmentalist message, it should be the Christian.

The Christian must address the environmental problem. The

problem is rooted in human sinfulness. This sinfulness manifests itself in two primary ways, greed and haste. Christians must stand against the exploitation, wasteful destruction, and abuse of land by companies seeking maximum profits with no regard for their surroundings. Francis Schaeffer rightfully stated that the Christian community must "refuse men the right to ravish the land, just as we refuse them the right to ravish our women."{4}

Few churches and schools preach or teach on the Christian view of the environment. This message must be taught once again in our churches and schools. Christians must also practice sound ecological principles such as recycling, using cleaner energy sources, and the conservation of energy. Christians should also be involved in environmental causes that seek to preserve the beauty of the land and promote responsible mining and use of our natural resources.

Although nature is affected by the fall, we must be involved in the healing process from the fall. Christians must restore the relationship between God and man which is done through the ministry of the gospel. We must also seek to restore the proper view of our role in caring for the environment.

Notes

1. Jo Piazza, "Audiences experience 'Avatar' blues" CNN Entertainment, www.cnn.com/2010/SHOWBIZ/Movies/01/11/avatar.movie.blues/index.html, accessed 11 Jan. 2010.
2. Ibid.
3. Douglas Moo, The Epistle to the Romans. *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 513.
4. Francis Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway Books, 1970), 82.

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Avatar: New Technology, Old Message

James Cameron's hit movie *Avatar* presents dazzling new animation technology and special effects yet an old message and a familiar story: when mankind embraces the pantheist worldview, there will result a oneness with nature. This enlightened union will lead to a life of peace and paradise upon the planet. The title of the movie itself gives its message away—an avatar in Hinduism is an incarnation or the descent of a deity to earth.

One of the most popular gods to appear as an avatar is Vishnu, the preserver god and one of the three main gods in the Hindu Pantheon. There are ten famous manifestations of Vishnu in the sacred writings of Hinduism [Jonathan Smith, ed. *The Harper Collins Dictionary of* Religion (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995), 96.].

In this movie the alien race, the blue–skinned Na'Vi, live in a forest paradise. Although they are technologically primitive, they are superior in their understanding of true reality and nature itself. They live an enlightened existence for they are in communion with Eywa, the "All Mother." Eywa is not a personal being, as with the Christian view of God, but an impersonal force made up of all things. Her force is concentrated in a large sacred tree in the middle of the sacred forest. The Na'Vi become one with Eywa when they attach their pony tails to one of her vines. In one scene, the hero of the movie attempts to warn Eywa of the battle soon to come and asks for her help. However, he is told by his alien wife that Eywa is neutral and does not get involved in issues of justice. In the movie, death is encountered several times and

the message is that at death, one's immaterial essence becomes one with Eywa. This is a clear presentation of the pantheist worldview and follows the same theme of such movies as *Pocahontas, Dances with Wolves,* and *Fern Gully*.

The conflict occurs when humans arrive on the planet and they, in contrast to the Na'Vi, are ignorant of Eywa and destroy the forest for monetary reasons. The army is portrayed as evil as they attempt to seize the sacred forest by force and mine the valuable minerals under the sacred tree. With primitive weapons, the alien beings defeat the well–armed humans and rescue their planet from destruction.

This movie is an evangelistic call for mankind to embrace the pantheistic worldview and attain oneness with the universe. As a result, peace will come and a harmonic paradise will be created. However, we must seriously question this message of hope. Pantheism is embraced in several countries. We must ask ourselves, have these countries attained a harmonic paradise? One nation that embraces the pantheistic worldview is India. Few would confidently state that Hinduism has brought a beautiful paradise in that nation.

Another important facet of pantheism is that nature takes precedence over human life. In India and Nepal, I have witnessed cows, monkeys, and even rats receiving better care than humans–and many are even worshipped while human beings remain secondary. Pantheism also denies the reality of this physical world and promotes the belief that the spirit world represents true reality. Thus, it in fact denies true reality. Finally, pantheism denies our humanity because it fails to acknowledge our individuality and sin nature. As a result, true transformation of human nature cannot occur through pantheism.

One of the valuable messages in *Avatar* is the value of caring for nature. This is one of the reasons many are attracted to this movie. The popularity of this pantheistic message points

out a shortcoming of the Christian church in modern times. As Christians, we are taught in Genesis to care for creation and not exploit it. However, unlike pantheism, we do not worship nature; instead, we are called to be stewards of what God created. We are to value what God has created and use the earth's resources responsibly, not in a destructive, uncaring manner. We are to develop technology to improve our lives and use it in a manner that reflects care for the creation around us. Scripture provides a clear exhortation to the church to articulate the biblical view of the environment.

Avatar is another apologetic for pantheism, perhaps the favorite worldview of Hollywood. However, it presents a false hope for peace and paradise. The Christian message of hope must be proclaimed in a compelling manner if we hope to gain the attention of our culture. The challenge before us is to demonstrate that Christianity offers the true message of hope. First, the miraculous, sinless life of Christ and His resurrection demonstrates He is the Creator, not an impersonal force. The true message of eternal life and forgiveness of sin is found in Christ alone. This message must be defended. Second, the biblical principles of responsible use of technology and care for the environment must be demonstrated.

Finally, creation is in a fallen state as the Bible teaches. Romans 8:20-21 states, "For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God." Creation and mankind await the day nature will be restored fully and the curse of sin will be taken away. This will happen not as a result of embracing the false ideas of pantheism but with the coming of the king of creation, Jesus Christ. Since God will restore creation, we should move in the direction of God's future restoration and carefully manage and restore areas we have destroyed.

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