

Is Jesus an Avatar? It's Complicated

John 1:14-18 (The "Word became flesh"; Jesus Christ is the only Son of God . . .)
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As many of you know, the film *Avatar* is nominated for an Academy Award for best motion picture, and tonight the awards will be announced. I imagine that a number of you have seen the film; however, I assume that plenty of you have not seen it. This sermon is *not* going to be a film review. The film *Avatar*, especially its *name*, a new term for millions of people, evokes a teachable moment--or, at least--a *curious* moment for us Christians.

By talking about the film, I am not necessarily recommending it. However, in order to talk about it I need to briefly explain the plot.

To increase the curiosity of the moment, I've tucked into this sermon the titles of the other nine movies that are nominated for Best Picture. If you want to go on a sort of audible scavenger hunt, you might listen for them.

The story of *Avatar* is set in the year 2154. Humans from earth are mining a precious mineral called *unobtanium* on Pandora, a lush moon in another star system. This mining threatens the Na'vi, which is the indigenous species of Pandora. Humans, mostly ex-marines, bomb the Na'vi, trying to scare them away from the site of the *unobtanium* mineral. However, the Na'vi stand tall, so to speak, defending themselves and their turf--even though they are a peaceful moon-loving Goddess worshipping culture. The ex-Marine humans do *not* succeed in annihilating the Na'vi nor in frightening them away; instead by the end of the film the aggressive humans themselves must retreat--they go **Up in the Air**, from the film's perspective as **Inglourious Basterds**.

Most people whom I have heard talk about this film say that the Na'vi "win." I would summarize the outcome slightly differently by saying that the Na'vi are finally left alone, but with a wounded moon and many dead Na'vi; they are not completely destroyed, but that hardly seems the same thing as "winning." There is much more "war" in this highly computer-generated film than in the film that is all about war, or, more accurately, the psychology of war, *The Hurt Locker*, which is also up for Best Picture.

So why is the title of the movie "*Avatar*"? It's because humans by the year 2154 have invented a machine that can transform a human into a genetically engineered Na'vi on Pandora. The genetically-engineered humanoid that looks like a Na'vi is called an "avatar." **An avatar is the embodiment of a being as an altered form in a different context.**¹ By the way, this machine also transforms the avatar back into a human being on earth, but the avatar needs to be *willing* to go back to being a human for the machine to work.

For example, if Jon Matthews lay in the transformative machine, he would emerge on Pandora with blue skin and slanty eyes. Not only that, he would be very tall and toothpick-shaped. Tall, blue, and very skinny. Think of it, Jon could run his marathons a lot more easily--but he would stand out! He wouldn't have to worry about his **Blind Side**.

Many who love computers, when they hear the title of this film, would think of the term "avatar" as it is used in *computer gaming*. If you play a game on your computer,

you need to be *represented* on the screen in order to interact with the other screen creatures. Your graphic image, the being on the screen that does what you tell it to do is called your “avatar.” I consulted with 6th grade Nic Cortz on this matter to get accurate information. He explained that in most of the games you get to choose how to represent yourself. Quoting him, “They give you facial expressions, facial hair, etc. and you click on the ones you want.” Nic explained that you can give yourself some things you don’t really have—like wings or a top hat. This is kind of cute: If you play the computer game Wii, the avatar of yourself on the screen is called your Mii.²

To make the film *Avatar* interesting, the ex-marine hero in his avatar state falls in love with a **Precious** indigenous Na’vi. This love-struck avatar, who was **A Serious Man** on earth, must by the end of the movie choose whether to remain an avatar on Pandora or to return to being a human on earth. (I won’t tell you which he chooses.)

Never having actually played a computer game myself, when I heard the title of this film, I did not think of computers. What I thought of was Hinduism! You see, I was fortunate to get **An Education** in Hinduism when I was in seminary. Nic told me that 6th graders in Redlands learn about Hinduism, too. Avatars are common in that ancient faith tradition. For example, one of the main Gods in Hinduism is Vishnu. Vishnu from time to time becomes incarnate on earth in order to rehabilitate the world. All these incarnations of Vishnu on earth are called his many avatars. One of his avatars you might have heard of is Krishna. When we hear people chanting, “Hare Krishna,” they are naming the avatar of the God Vishnu.

Hinduism is so capable of adapting and assimilating other religions, that plenty of Hindus saw no difficulty in speaking of Jesus as another avatar of the God Vishnu. I guess those Hindus could easily answer my sermon question, “Is Jesus an avatar?” They would say, “Yes.”

To summarize: In Hinduism, *an avatar is the descent of a God into some human or animal form on earth.* In the computer world, *an avatar is a graphic representation of us on our computer screens.*

If an avatar is the incarnation of God, from a Christian perspective, is Jesus Christ an avatar? Recall that John the Baptist called Jesus and Christians for centuries have called Jesus the Son of God or the Word become flesh. Is that the same as an avatar?

I thought this would be a fascinating reflection, but the more I’ve reflected, the more I realize--**It’s Complicated!**

Since it’s complicated, I think we need a break for some levity: A preacher was completing a sermon against drinking alcohol: with great expression he said, "If I had all the beer in the world, I'd take it and throw it into the river." With even greater emphasis, he said, "And if I had all the wine in the world, I'd take it and throw it into the river." And then, finally, he said, "And if I had all the whiskey in the world, I'd take it and throw it into the river." He sat down. The song leader then stood very cautiously and announced with a pleasant smile, "For our closing song, let us sing Hymn #365: 'Shall We Gather At the River.'"

Now back to the complicated question: “Is Jesus an Avatar?”

Let’s gather the reasons for answering that question “Yes” and the reasons for “No.”

Most Christians think of Jesus as the *incarnation of God* on earth. Does that make him an avatar? Yes?

Well, think of this, many Christians would also say that God is incarnate in the bread and juice of Communion, God is incarnate in the rose-colored peach blossoms around town, in fact, God is incarnate in you, all of you, and me. Yet we do not say that the peach tree or the bread and juice or you and I are “avatars” of God, just that God is incarnate in all of God’s creation. So, is Jesus an avatar? No?

In the movie, a human being is no longer a human when he or she transforms into an avatar on Pandora. The hero, for example, is *either* human or avatar, never both. That certainly is *not* the view of most Christians when we speak of God being incarnate in Jesus. We think that God remains God AND is incarnate in Jesus. So, it is *more* descriptive to speak of Jesus as SON of God, *from* God, but not all of God “descended” to earth. The parent does not become the son; rather the parent births the son. This might lead us to say that Jesus is *not* God’s avatar.

However, in computer gaming, the person playing the game still exists while seeing themselves on the screen. The screen *represents* the human who is playing the game. Nic and his avatar that might have a top hat both exist at the same time. Thinking of computer-type avatars, we might agree that Jesus *does represent* what God might be like if God were to be humanoid. Thinking this way, we might say, sure, Jesus was God’s avatar, for he *represented* what a God-like person could be!

Christians have many different beliefs about WHY God would “come to earth” as Jesus and IF it were necessary for God to come to earth as a human at all. Often Christians speak of Jesus as “saving” humans, or we speak of God needing to send a “savior” to earth to make things right again with humans or between humans and God. That is in fact the reason for avatars in Hinduism, too--to help set things right again. In the movie, the hero avatar does help to save the moon culture, but as a humanoid Na’vi, not as some divine being. We Christians might ask, “Why would God *need* to come to earth to persuade persons to do or be what God could seemingly be able to persuade us to do or be just by being God?” Couldn’t *God* persuade us *as God usually does*--through our own imagination, intelligence, compassion, energy, will power, and creativity . . . ? Maybe Jesus as human was so open to God’s Word, that he “fleshed” it out exceptionally. There’s no need for avatar-thinking about the phenomenon.

Okay, about as many reasons for a yes as a no answer to the question, “Is Jesus an Avatar?” based both on how we understand *Jesus to be related to God* and *how we think about avatars*.

If I had to answer one way or the other I’d say “No.” Jesus was not God’s avatar. In Jesus’ behavior, we see radical love and always life-giving behavior. Somehow wherever he was he evoked *compassion in spite of confusion*. Fullness of life, even where life is fragile--whether on Pandora, Redlands, Afghanistan, Chile, Haiti, Iraq, or **District 9**--is attained for all when enough of us humans choose radical compassion and justice. If we only think of God as **Up**, then we might *need* Divine-human avatars. However, both on the fictional moon Pandora and on our very real Earth, ***we can experience humans and God intertwining all the time without any gap that needs to be bridged.***

However, as I have struggled with this question, I have decided that it is a good *exercise for us to playfully and prayerfully imagine* that if God were playing a computer game and needed an avatar to represent God-like qualities, behaviors, and attitudes on God’s screen, would *we* be a possible choice? Wouldn’t it be heaven on earth if we could wonder about almost everyone, “Are *you* God’s avatar?”

¹ Definitions of Avatar, printed as “Meditative Thought” on the Bulletin

1. *Hindu Mythology*. The descent of a deity to the earth in an incarnate form or some manifest shape; the incarnation of a god.
2. An embodiment or personification, as of a principle, attitude, or view of life.
3. *Computers*. A graphical image that represents a person, as on the Internet.

² I recall when our son played the video arcade game “Street Fighter” as I watched on. (That is pretty “old school” now.) I used to ask, “Which one are you?” That is, which animated fighting creature are you controlling with your joy-stick?