

**Avatar in Three Dimensions**

By L. Daniel Hawk\*

The stories we tell, and the stories we embrace, reveal much about how we look at ourselves, our world, and our place in the world. Narratives encode our convictions, validate our beliefs, voice our anxieties, and assemble the events of our lives and memories into a meaningful coherence. They define us more clearly than textbooks or mission statements. This is particularly true of the grand narratives that configure the identities and perspectives of groups and peoples. And it is certainly true of the biblical narrative, which Christians appropriate to define faith and practice and to comprehend the world and God's work within it.<sup>1</sup>

One of the narratives at the center of today's cultural radar is the one told by James Cameron's *Avatar*.<sup>2</sup> The cinematic epic tells the story of Jake Sully, a veteran who has lost the use of his legs in an unspecified future war. Jake is recruited to participate in the Avatar Program, a venture overseen by the Resources Development Administration. The RDA has established a colony on Pandora, a heavily-forested planet located more than four light years from Earth. The military and economic interests that drive the organization seek Unobtainium, a mineral considered essential for alleviation of an energy crisis on Earth. The atmosphere on Pandora, however, is toxic to earthlings. In order to survive on Pandora, the Avatar Program has developed a way of linking human minds with bodies that genetically resemble the Na'vi, the humanoid inhabitants of the planet. Jake's twin brother Tom, a scientist, was to link to one of the bodies but died, prompting the invitation to Jake, who is Tom's genetic match.

Humans live and breathe on Pandora only by linking their consciousness to an avatar, while their bodies remain asleep inside a climate-controlled facility. The events that occur on Pandora change Jake's perspectives and identity, as encounters with the Na'vi transform him from a mercenary in the service of the RDA to a Na'vi who fights for the survival of the people who have adopted him. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that the earthlings will stop at nothing to drive out the Na'vi and acquire Unobtainium, and the latter part of the movie exposes their greed and savagery as they destroy Hometree, a Na'vi village, and attempt to destroy Eywa, the sacred tree that ties all life on the planet together.

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## *Avatar* in Three Dimensions

The story of conquest that *Avatar* tells is a familiar one. In the background lie narratives of colonial conquest, and particularly the conquest of the Americas. *Avatar* is a variation on the America's national narrative of westward expansion and empire-building, whereby invaders with advanced technology drive out indigenous peoples and occupy their lands. Cameron, however, prompts viewers to see the story through the experiences and perspectives of the indigenous people, and he gives it a twist. In his version, the invaders are repelled.

It is not surprising to see the American story in the background of *Avatar*. Narratives are not created *ex nihilo*. They construct infrastructures and assemble building blocks quarried from the stories that constitute the bedrock of the cultures in which they are told. Narratives retell other stories, selecting and rearranging stock elements, assembling them into recognizable patterns, and playing off the expectations of their readers and viewers.

In *Avatar* we see character types that also inhabit America's conquest narratives. On the one side, there is Miles Quaritch, the military leader in the employ of the economic power (RDA), who wants only to drive out "the savages." On the other, there is Tsu'Tey, the indigenous warrior who dies defending his people and home. In between is the protagonist, Jake Sully, the conflicted invader turned renegade, who embodies the invader's ambivalence about conquest. There is Neytiri, the indigenous woman who helps the invader and becomes the bridge to her people. And there is her invader-counterpart, Dr. Grace Augustine, the gruff and gritty heroine with a compassionate heart.

The corresponding American narrative takes many of its building blocks from the biblical book of Joshua. The idea of America as a Promised Land and the American people as uniquely blessed, with a divine destiny to bring liberty to all humankind, draws directly from motifs prominent in Israel's story of the conquest of Canaan. The central plot of that story – the annihilation of the indigenous peoples and ethnic cleansing of the land for the purpose of establishing a new nation – also stands as the central thread of America's narrative of nation-building.

*Avatar* is therefore a three-dimensional cinematic narrative that retells an American story that retells a biblical one. How does *Avatar* retell the story, and what does it tell us about what is happening in our culture? How might a biblical lens help Christians discern the cultural currents, traditions, and convictions that configure and find expression in it? As the biblical counterpart of the contemporary movie, how might the book of Joshua assist us in seeing the narrative thread that links our national story with this new cinematic iteration?

As a narrative, the book of Joshua presents a complex account of ancient Israel's reflection on its invasion and settlement of the land of Canaan. As Christian scripture, it extends the story into modern contexts and the ongoing negotiation of national memory and identity. Extending Joshua in the direction of *Avatar* makes connections that enable contemporary Christians to discern and respond to the contesting values, perspectives, and convictions that infuse contemporary America's thinking about itself.<sup>3</sup>

### *Indigenous Women and the Invaders Who Love Them*

One of the characters that figures prominently in biblical Joshua, the American master narrative, and *Avatar* is the indigenous woman who helps the invader. In Joshua, Israelites no sooner enter the land than they encounter a Canaanite prostitute named Rahab, who protects them when the local authorities come looking for them, and then helps them make their getaway (Josh 2:1-24). At the beginning of America's story, Captain John Smith, a leader of England's first colony at Jamestown, is saved from death by Pocahontas, who subsequently becomes a bridge between the colony and the Powhatan Confederacy. Two centuries later, when the young United States embarks on a "voyage of discovery" into the land it purchased from the French, Lewis and Clark meet Sacagawea, who guides and helps the explorers on their mission. Along similar lines Jake Sully, in the person of his avatar, meets Neytiri, a Na'vi woman who rescues him from viperwolves in the Pandora wilderness. Neytiri takes Jake to her village and, like her counterparts, Rahab and Pocahontas, becomes the invader's advocate before her people.

Why do conquest narratives include stories about indigenous women who help the invaders? That the invader is male and the indigene is female can be viewed as a reflection of the patriarchal societies that tell the stories; as in the societies, men occupy center stage and women take the role of helpers. Yet why is it important to the invader to include a story-line about indigenous helpers – and in the case of America, to memorialize them in movies (*Pocahontas*, *The New World*) and tokens of economic exchange (Sacagawea, on the U.S. one-dollar coin)?

The stories can be read as expressions of the invader's sense of superiority and a claim that destiny was on their side; the indigenous women's welcome implicitly recognizes the invader's power and the inevitability of their people's demise. Or the stories can be read as attempts to assuage the invaders' guilt about the conquest; the women's assistance signals that the peoples of the land really *welcomed* the invasion.

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*Avatar*, however, does something that the American narrative does not do. Neytiri ennobles the indigenous peoples and by contrast, unmasks the violence of the invaders and their supposed superiority. Viewers thus come to the realization that the real savages are the invaders, not the indigenous people.

This is precisely the reversal of perspective that the biblical story of Rahab elicits. Biblical readers know who the good guys and the bad girl are in this story. Yet as it unfolds, Rahab displays qualities that Israelites admired (e.g. resourcefulness, cunning, faithfulness). She, not the spies, praises Yhwh and acclaims God's mighty acts of salvation. By the end of the story, readers find themselves identifying with the indigenous woman rather than the invaders, just as earthbound viewers find themselves identifying with Neytiri and the peoples of Pandora.

The biblical account uses the device of reversal to humanize the indigenous peoples of Canaan, dismantle perceptions of superiority, and destabilize the rhetoric that viewed them as deserving of annihilation. The attitudes evidently remained prevalent when the story was written down, for the narrator later remarks that Rahab's descendents remained "to this day" at the margins of Israelite society (Josh 6:23, 25). The rendering and placement of the Rahab story nonetheless reveals that Israel was rethinking and reworking its memories of conquest as a way of coming to terms with the residue of its violent treatment of the indigenous people of the land. *Avatar*'s dignifying portrayal of indigenous people through Neytiri suggests that American society is in the midst of a similar rethinking.

### *Double Vision*

Conquest narratives work by establishing and maintaining a stark distinction between the invader "us" and the indigenous "them." Shaping the indigenous *them* into the opposite of the invader *us* enables the invader to soothe moral qualms about conquest. Casting the invaders as civilized and the indigenous peoples as savages, opposing advanced to primitive, pious to pagan, peaceful to warlike, or even human to animal, implicitly justifies the violence meted out to indigenous peoples, who in some way can be viewed as opposing progress or destiny. Principled invaders expend considerable energy maintaining these distinctions, because if they break down, the indigenous peoples begin to look as fully human as the invaders – which makes dispossessing, exploiting, and killing indigenous peoples look uncomfortably like theft, oppression, and murder.

These are some of the oppositions that Anglo-America employed to construct its identity and that of the indigenous peoples of the continent. Popular literature during the 19th and early 20th Century, such as Robert Bird's *Nick of the Woods*, popularized the image of the bloodthirsty redskin.<sup>4</sup> Political discourse explained indigenous resistance to Western civilization and Christianity in terms of inferior intelligence or a primitive moral sensibility. Francis Parkman, arguably the foremost American historian of the 19th Century, summed up the spirit of the age with remarkable simplicity when he described the Indian as "man, wolf, and devil all in one."<sup>5</sup>

One problem with the invader's projections is that experience exposes them for the fabrications they are. The early colonists in America would not have survived had not indigenous peoples imparted to them their rich agricultural wisdom. The eloquence and acuity of indigenous orators consistently impressed colonial listeners. Indigenous cultures were so strong and sophisticated that many scholars have conjectured that were it not for the epidemics that ravaged Native peoples (at mortality rates that in some cases approached ninety percent), the whole colonial enterprise might have turned out very differently.

Another problem is that even the invader recognizes the falsity of the constructions. Guilt and misgiving seep through in various ways, and especially through stories that portray the nobility of the indigenous peoples and depict invaders "going Native." The result is an ambivalent, schizoid invader identity.

This bifurcated identity is expressed in *Avatar* by the earthlings' psychic distance but bodily closeness to the peoples of Pandora. The earth people involved in the Avatar Program are in Pandora but not of Pandora; they interact with the Na'vi through their avatars. They physically remain in an earthlike environment and among their own people but become indigenous through their avatar bodies. They are earth minds and identities clothed in Pandora bodies – not all that different from Americans who put on Native dress and mimic Native practices at summer camps, youth organizations, and sporting events.<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Grace Augustine and Jake Sully comprise a complementary ambivalence: woman and man, brains and brawn, controlled and impulsive. Life among the Na'vi exposes the civil they are a part of and when they realize the aims and actions of their people, they can no longer reconcile the identity-polarity within themselves. They become renegades. Like the renegades in American stories, their decision to go native exposes the invader's identity constructions, which cannot be allowed.<sup>7</sup> As renegades, Grace and Jake

represent a threat so dangerous that they must be eliminated. In the movie, Quaritch mortally wounds Grace and attempts to kill Jake in the climactic final battle.

In the biblical conquest narrative, the polarity works in the opposite direction. The Gibeonite story (Joshua 9) dismantles the “godly us” vs. “ungodly them” polarity of Israel’s conquest rhetoric and humanizes the indigenous peoples. In Joshua, the Canaanite kings become the manifestation of the indigenous forces that threaten Israel. The Gibeonites, however, have no king. Like Rahab, their indigenous counterpart, they are cunning and opportunistic. During their parlay with Israel, they alone praise Yhwh and acclaim God’s mighty acts of salvation. They trick Israel’s leaders into making a treaty and ultimately are assigned as laborers to service at the altar – the holiest location in Israel and the center of invaders’ community.

*Avatar* and Joshua take invader ambivalence in different directions; invaders are incorporated into the indigenous community in the former, indigenous into the invader in the latter. Both, however, illumine the ways that conquest narratives construct identities in order to justify conquest. Both, however, also destabilize the invader’s sense of difference by portraying indigenous peoples who embody the positive qualities the invaders attribute to themselves. The extent to which this has happened in America’s identity and narrative remains open to question.

### *Scorched Earth*

One of the pivotal scenes in *Avatar* takes place when Secops, the security force under the command of Col. Miles Quaritch, attacks the Na’vi heartland, slaughters Na’vi villagers, and burns Hometree, their dwelling place. Quaritch personifies imperialist militarism. He hates the Na’vi, whom he regards as savages and obstacles in the way of a resource deemed necessary to earth’s viability. In an early scene he warns newly arrived soldiers about the Na’vi’s vicious aggressiveness, projecting the invader’s violence onto the indigenous inhabitants and implying that invader excursions are justifiable defensive operations. At Hometree, and in the climactic scene at the sacred tree Eywa, Quaritch leads a campaign of indiscriminate killing and devastation, revealing the invader’s moral imperative: the end justifies the means.

Mass killing and wanton destruction were common elements of warfare among the civilized societies of the ancient Near East. Israel was a part of that world, and so it is no surprise that its conquest narrative exults in reports that Joshua “killed everything that breathed.” A tone of militant triumphalism is

particularly pervasive in Joshua 11-12, which draws on rhetoric well-known in the military literature of other nations of the period. Although a few references to the sin of the indigenous peoples appear in preceding books of the Bible, no such reference appears in Joshua. The book itself does not present the annihilation of the indigenous population as an act of judgment but rather as a program of dispossession necessary to achieve a utopian vision of a land inhabited only by Israelites.

Wars of annihilation and devastation do not appear to have been an aspect of war in pre-contact America. Early colonial narratives, supported by indigenous traditions, indicate that warfare among the indigenous peoples was ritualized and limited. Accounts of early conflicts reveal settler frustration with Indian allies, who left the field after shooting all their arrows or after the deaths of a few combatants. It did not take long, however, for the English colonists to replicate the violence of the horrendous religious wars that devastated Europe in the 17th Century. The watershed occurred when rising tensions, caused in part by the expansion of New England colonies, prompted the colonists to make a pre-emptive strike on a Pequot Village near Mystic River in 1637. Surrounding the village when the warriors were away, the colonial force burned the village and slaughtered almost all of its 400-500 inhabitants, mostly women, children, and elderly. "Total war," in other words, was a European import.<sup>8</sup>

The practice inaugurated at Mystic Fort would be replicated at Gnadenhutten, Sand Creek, Wounded Knee, and countless lesser-known sites . . . and when the Native populations had been subdued, would continue westward across the Pacific Ocean to places like Balangiga, Hiroshima, and My Lai. Scorched earth policies, which subjected indigenous populations to exposure and starvation, also became stock elements of American warfare. Campaigns to burn villages and fields were initiated during the Revolution, perfected in the conquest of the Old Northwest, and adapted to the subjugation of Plains peoples through the mass slaughter of bison.

In Joshua, the narrator attempts to mask the scope and brutality of the conquest by rendering the wars against the indigenous peoples as defensive operations. The kings of Canaan, who embody the hostile powers of the land, are presented as increasingly aggressive as the story goes along, beginning with the attempt of Jericho's king to find the spies and culminating in attacks by coalitions of kings at Gibeon and the waters of Merom. The battles at Ai (8:10-29), Gibeon (9:1-2; 10:1-15), and the waters of Merom (11:1-9) all begin when Canaanite kings attack the Israelites, thereby casting the invading Israelites as defenders rather than aggressors.<sup>9</sup>

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A corresponding move configured America's expansion into indigenous lands. When settlers encroached on these lands, colonial governments generally depicted the Native peoples, rather than the settlers, as aggressive and brutal. The colonists, for example, blamed the British crown for fomenting Indian savagery against settlers in the Ohio Country, leading to the last of the accusations against George III listed in the Declaration of Independence: "He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions." The accusation conveniently omits the fact that "undistinguished destruction" characterized settler practice to an even greater extent and that, rather than being beleaguered victims, the inhabitants constituted a settler tsunami that was deluging lands the Crown had promised to reserve for Native peoples.

The scope of the violence experienced by the indigenous peoples of the Americas is virtually beyond comprehension and for the most part has been successfully repressed in America's corporate memory. *Avatar* takes a step toward bringing these repressed national memories to the surface by projecting the conquest of indigenous peoples into a fantasy world, creating distance and enabling viewers to experience conquest from their perspective. Joshua takes a different tack by portraying the humanity of indigenous people early in the narrative (Rahab, the Gibeonites), before reporting the full extent of Israel's conquests (Josh 10:28-12:24). Both the film and the biblical text, in their own ways, challenge American Christians to expose the nation's stories of conquest and the perspectives that shape them.

### *Alien Invasion*

Renowned astrophysicist Stephen Hawking recently cautioned against trying to contact extra-terrestrial life, warning that aliens advanced enough to reach the earth might be looking for a world to conquer and colonize. "We only have to look at ourselves to see how intelligent life might develop into something we wouldn't want to meet," he says. "If aliens ever visit us, I think the outcome would be much as when Christopher Columbus first landed in America, which didn't turn out very well for the Native Americans."<sup>10</sup>

Hawking is speaking to a theme that has acquired increasing cultural prominence in the last twenty years. *Avatar* is the latest in a flurry of alien invasion narratives that have proliferated in the movies (e.g. *Independence Day*, *War of the Worlds*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *Signs*, among many others),

television (*V*, *X-Files*, *Alien Nation*, *Invasion*, etc.), and popular culture (e.g. UFO sightings, alien abductions). The current interest is matched only by its original manifestation in the sci-fi films of the late 50's and early '60's, when the United States emerged into a position of unparalleled global influence and cultural dominance. What does America's present preoccupation with alien invasion motifs, now exemplified by *Avatar*, the highest-grossing film of all time, say about what might be going on in the American national psyche?

It is not uncommon to encounter the claim that the United States used the biblical book of Joshua as a template to legitimize the conquest of the continent. On the face of it, the claim seems self-evident. The earliest Puritans saw themselves as a New Israel birthed by deliverance from oppression, a passage through the sea, and entrance into a Promised Land, which they called the New Canaan. The early Republic then took up the Puritans' Exodus imagery as a means of uniting the fractious colonies and identifying America as a new people, delivered from tyranny and destined to be a beacon of freedom for all nations.

Taking up the Exodus motif as a template, however, also entails taking up the Conquest; the two motifs are inseparable in scripture. Even a cursory acquaintance with American history reveals that the nation that conceived of itself as a New Israel replicated the mass killing, ethnic cleansing, and exclusivist attitudes that tell the tale of Israel's conquest of Canaan. It seems only logical to assume, then, that America drew inspiration for its program of westward expansion from the book of Joshua.

The truth of the matter, however, is that references to Joshua are virtually absent from America's religious and civic discourse from the colonial period to the present. Whereas expansionist America readily identified with the Israel of the Exodus, it could not seem to face the fact that, in practice, it behaved more like the Israel of the Conquest. In other words, the United States explicitly and consistently defined itself as an Exodus people, a people destined to bear salvation and liberty to all, but it repressed actions and perspectives that suggested it behaved like a Conquest people.

While we may easily recognize how repressed memories and impulses influence individual attitudes and behavior, we may not so easily realize how this can also be true of corporate entities. Memories repressed by a people, like those repressed by individuals, don't fade away. Left to themselves, they simmer within the corporate unconsciousness, warping perspectives and practices, until they bubble to the surface in a time of crisis.

Is it a coincidence that invasion motifs have surfaced in America during a period of economic instability, decline in global influence, and a war on terror? Was it a coincidence that they arose when the Cold War and the prospect of nuclear annihilation confronted the U.S? What does the American preoccupation with alien invasion manifest? Repressed guilt and remorse? Anxiety that in a just universe, “what goes around comes around”? A realization that the God who gives is also the God who may take away?

As Israel reflected on memories of its origins as a nation, it could not get around the violent stories and events that shaped its national identity. But at a later time, in light of its own experiences of suffering and salvation, the nation realized that the dehumanizing and violent impulses associated with those traditions were not consistent with the nation God had called Israel to be. The book in its canonical form bears the traces of this rethinking-over-time, resulting in a narrative that offers varying perspectives on what happened and why.<sup>11</sup> If the American Church is inclined to follow Israel’s example, it might enter this moment with the prophet’s challenge to name America’s original sins, turn from the perspectives and practices they have generated, and bring a justice long denied. In doing so, the body of Christ might more fully reveal the Prince of Peace to a watching world.

*For Further Reading*

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Warrior, Robert Allen. "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians." *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 59 (2005): 1-8. See also the other articles in this volume, which is devoted to articles on Christianity and narratives of conquest.

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ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Portions of this article appeared previously in a series of posts to the weblog of Allan R. Bevere, <http://arbevere.blogspot.com>. I owe thanks to Dr. Bevere for the invitation to post the series to his blog and for his permission to use the posts for this article, and to David Baker for the invitation to write the essay.

<sup>2</sup> James Cameron, director and producer. *Avatar*. Twentieth Century Fox, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> There is not a canonical version of the American master narrative. I assume, however, that the motifs, key events, and major characters that configure it are well-known to American readers.

<sup>4</sup> Robert M. Bird, *Nick of the Woods: Adventures of Prairie Life*, 1837. Reprint, Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World*. Oxford: Oxford University, 1992, 244.

<sup>6</sup> Philip J. Deloria (*Playing Indian*. New Haven: Yale University, 1998) offers a detailed and fascinating study of American society's mimicry of Indian customs in various social contexts. He argues that the American impulse to "play Indian" derives from the need of white culture to separate from the Old World but at the same time to preserve European culture.

<sup>7</sup> By choosing to live among indigenous peoples, renegades threaten the invaders' dichotomous identity construction and expose the fiction that their culture is superior. They are therefore often doubly-demonized. In Ohio lore, the Girty brothers, who lived and fought with the indigenous peoples of the area, were consistently rendered as even more brutal than the "savages" with whom they lived. Conversely Tom Quick and the Wetzels, who killed scores of indigenous men, women, and children in cold blood, were memorialized as heroic Indian fighters.

<sup>8</sup> The History Channel, in an episode titled "Massacre at Mystic," presented an account of the event as the first in its series, "10 Days That Unexpectedly Changed America." The presentation notes that the colonists' slaughter of Pequots set the precedent for subsequent conflicts with Native peoples. See the print version, Steven M. Gillion, *10 Days That Unexpectedly Changed America* (New York: Three Rivers, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed study of this narrative strategy, see L. Daniel Hawk, "Conquest Reconfigured: Recasting Warfare in the Redaction of Joshua," *Reading and Writing War: Rhetoric, Gender, and Ethics in Biblical and Modern Contexts* (ed. Brad E. Kelle and Frank Ritchel Ames; SBLSS 42; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 145-160.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Leake, "Don't Talk to Aliens, Warns Stephen Hawking," *The Times*, April 25, 2010. Online:

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/science/space/article7107207.ece>.

<sup>11</sup> Joshua has befuddled many interpreters by its presentation of perspectives that cannot seemingly be reconciled. Compare, for example, the claim that "Joshua took the whole land" (11:23) with the later assertion that vast tracts of land remain outside Israel's possession (13:1-7).