

# Avatar and the Longing for Eden

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By

Patrick Zukeran

There are very few movies that can be considered truly groundbreaking. James Cameron's hit movie *Avatar* easily ranks as one among this elite category of movie. This movie features new technology and special effects that make it a landmark fantasy film joining the elite group of movies which include *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Star Wars*, and *Lord of the Rings*. *Avatar* was one of the most expensive movies ever made, but it is also one of the most profitable as it has generated over one billion dollars in ticket sales both domestically and worldwide.

What accounts for the tremendous popularity of this movie? The cutting-edge technology combined with a storyline of a 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 22nd century alien world of Pandora. Pandora is a spectacular tropical paradise inhabited by the ten-foot-tall, blue-skinned Na'vi. Through innovative 3-D technology, we are enveloped in this stunning paradise with vivid detail 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 condition of the environment and longed for the paradise of Pandora. Several websites included hundreds of entries from individuals who expressed their sense of mourning and regret, for in Pandora many saw a paradise that was either lost or one that can never be attained on this earth. On one of the *Avatar* forum sites an individual identified as Ivar Hill wrote the following: "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 continued his post with, "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."<sup>1</sup>

What accounts for this deep emotional longing aroused by this movie? I believe within all people there is a longing for Eden, a paradise where mankind and nature live in perfect harmony. We long for a world of pristine beauty and grandeur. We are invigorated and enthralled by wondrous sites of nature, such as the Grand Canyon, Mount Everest, the beaches of Hawaii, and the Amazon rainforests. Where does this longing of Eden derive from?

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<sup>1</sup> Jo Piazza, "Audiences experience 'Avatar' blues" CNN Entertainment, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/SHOWBIZ/Movies/01/11/avatar.movie.blues/index.html>, 11 Jan. 2010.

In chapter 1 of Genesis God created the heavens and the earth. In His original creation, sin was not present. All that God created was good, and man lived in a perfect world free from sin and its effects. In Eden, man was assigned to rule over creation and work the land. 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 Christian view of the environment, the contrasting pantheist and Biblical environmental messages, and the future hope of a restored Eden.

## Paradise Lost

The movie *Avatar* immerses its viewers in the strikingly serene futuristic planet of Pandora. Pandora is a beautiful tropical paradise of glimmering trees and flowers of psychedelic colors. There are sparkling crystal rivers and breathtaking floating mountains in the majestic clouds. Here on this planet, the Na'vi and the animals live in harmony with one another and nature.

What made *Avatar* unique was that viewers could experience this world in 3-D. With cutting edge technology, movie-goers encounter this world in a deeper and richer way. Enveloping the audience in the beauty of the setting, the movie awakened in many the longing for a paradise that resides in each one of us. 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 of this article. Whichever position you may hold regarding 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. The prophet Isaiah states, "He stretches out the heavens like a canopy and spreads them out like a tent to live in" (Isa. 40:22.) 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 the first chapter, God reflects upon His creation and states that "... it was very good."

Genesis 2:8-9 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 untarnished by sin or its effects. Man lived in harmony with both nature and the animals in garden.

The text also states that the trees of Eden were pleasing to eye and good for food. Eden was a place of wonder and tremendous beauty. Living in Hawaii, each day as I walk along the beach or view the soaring cliffs along the shore, I am in awe of the beauty of the islands, as are many who visit the islands. However, Eden was even greater in its beauty and splendor. 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 chapter 3, the greatest tragedy in history takes place. Sin enters into the created order. From that point on, we witness the effects of sin infiltrating God's good creation. Sin disrupts the harmony of 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.

For the next several chapters of Genesis, we see the destructive effects of sin upon mankind and creation. Now mankind longs for what was present in Eden, a place of pristine beauty and perfect harmony between God, man, and creation. Is Eden lost forever? Will paradise ever be restored? This is the redemption story of the Bible.

## **Stewardship over the Earth**

The appeal of the hit movie *Avatar* was not only its technology but also 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 rather 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, whose 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. Similarly, the Na'vi also achieve oneness with the animals when they attach their ponytails to similar features on the creatures they seek to domesticate. All in all, Na'vi and nature live in complete harmony.

*Avatar* presents a pantheistic worldview, and the environmentalist message is wrapped up in this worldview. In pantheistic religions, "salvation" and restoration come when man attains oneness with the universe. *Avatar* presents a similar message. Harmony with the environment and healing for mankind will come when mankind attains oneness with mother earth. In other words, hope for restoring our planet is found in the pantheistic worldview. Many have responded to 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.

Does the Christian worldview present an environmentalist message? It certainly does; however, very few are aware of 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 effectively promoted. The Bible teaches a great deal about the relationship between man and the environment. Psalm 24:1-2 states, "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters." The Bible teaches that we are to care for the environment because we are to care for that which God has

created. Matthew 6:26-30 reveals God's continual care and maintenance of His creatures, even in the tiny details.

The pantheists care for the environment because they view man and nature as one; therefore, man is of equal value as the animals and the plants. In pantheism, man worships nature, or the mother earth. Nature is valuable because all the universe and mankind are one in essence.

Unlike pantheism, the Bible teaches that God created the universe but is independent of it. God is not dependent upon the universe; rather, He rules and sustains the universe. Man was originally commanded to exercise careful and thoughtful stewardship over the earth. Having dominion over God's creation has never given man the freedom to exploit the earth of its resources or to be careless in dealing with the environment.

In Genesis 2:15, man is given the responsibility to care for the environment. The Hebrew word for "care" is *shamar*. The basic meaning of the root is "to exercise great care over."<sup>2</sup> In this passage it has the nuance to "take care of or guard." The verb is the same as that used of a shepherd who guards his flock (Gen. 30:31), someone guarding a house (2 Sam. 15:16), and the cherubim guarding the tree of life (Gen. 3:24).<sup>3</sup> Thus, Eden was to be protected, rather than possessed, by man.<sup>4</sup>

This command still applies to us today. We are not to worship nature but instead we are to rule over and care for nature as wise and careful guardians. We are not to exploit the earth as the humans portrayed in *Avatar* sought to do, 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 as wise stewards who exercise care and guardianship over what God has created.

## 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 in awe of the beauty of the planet Pandora but disgusted when they reflected on the state of our planet today. Blogging on the previously mentioned *Avatar* site, Ivar Hill continued with, "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."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Laird Harris, Gleason Archer, Bruce Waltke, *Theological Workbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1980), 939.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 939.

<sup>4</sup> Victor Hamilton, *Genesis: The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990). 171.

The pantheist hope, as reflected in *Avatar*, is that when enough of mankind is enlightened, paradise on earth will be restored. In Genesis 1 and 2, man once lived in paradise in Eden. In Genesis 3, paradise was lost. 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:

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. 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 both the Christian and creation will both be transformed and delivered from the present state of subjection to decay as a result of sin. At this time we experience frustration and incompleteness as we await this coming transformation.<sup>6</sup>

The Bible promises that paradise will be restored; however, it will not be by the work of man or an enlightened mind. Instead, paradise will be restored through the return of the King of Creation. When Christ returns, He will defeat evil, and then as Revelation 21:1 states, “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. Those who have trusted in Christ will be transformed into a glorious eternal physical body (1 Cor. 15), and all creation will be transformed into a glorious state as well. That longing for Eden residing in all of us will be realized. However, our hope is not in attaining oneness with the earth but in the return of the King of Creation.

## Until Creation is Restored

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<sup>5</sup> Jo Piazza, “Audiences experience 'Avatar' blues” CNN Entertainment, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/SHOWBIZ/Movies/01/11/avatar.movie.blues/index.html>, 11 Jan. 2010.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

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 the enlightenment of mankind. Man must realize that he is one with all of nature. This actually decreases the value of man because it makes him equal in value to plants and animals. When enough people attain enlightenment and accept their standing as no greater than nature, 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. In the Biblical worldview, man is greater than nature and is appointed to rule over nature. We are stewards of God's creation, and as such, we are commanded to exercise great care over the earth. Throughout the Bible, God commands believers to care for the land. For example, in Leviticus 25, God commands His people to sow the fields for six years but in the seventh year, they must not sow in order to give the land rest. Moreover, in Deuteronomy 22:1-12, God commands His people to care for the both the domesticated and 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."<sup>7</sup>

Few churches and schools preach or teach on the Christian view of the environment. This message must once again be taught 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 are called to restore the relationship between God and man; included within this is the responsibility to restore and care for the environment. The Bible offers a strong environmental message built on truth that the earth is the Lord's (Ps. 24:1-2).

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<sup>7</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway Books, 1970), 82.

## Conclusion

To say that the movie *Avatar* was a very successful movie is an understatement. Its 3-D technology provided a new way to experience the exotic beauty of the planet Pandora. This experience awakened the longing for Eden and the desire of beauty and harmony with creation which resides in all of us. This longing, I believe, find its roots in Eden, the paradise lost in the fall of Genesis 3.

In *Avatar*, the hope for restoration of the planet is based on the pantheist worldview. When mankind realizes we are all one with the universe, that plants, animals, and insects are all connected and equal in value, the environment will be restored. I believe this is a false message and a false hope. According to the Bible, sin will continue to take its toll on creation until the King of Creation returns to restore His created order. Until then, Christians are called to present the message of the gospel and restore the relationship of man to his creator.

*Avatar* also identified a void in the contemporary Christian message. The Church has failed to present a cohesive Biblical environmentalist message. For this reason, much of the environmentalist movement is dominated by the overtones of pantheistic religions. Christians must educate their people and present the Biblical environmental message. With so much focus on our environment today, this is a message the Church cannot neglect.