

## EMPIRE, MESSIAH AND VIOLENCE: A CONTEMPORARY VIEW<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*Set against the backdrop of theories on the link between monotheism, messianic persons and human violence, the relationship between Jesus and violence, as portrayed in the New Testament, is investigated with reference to a recent Hollywood film, *The Matrix* (Warner Brothers, 1999). Traditionally the link between Jesus and violence was perceived in the various forms of victimisation he and his disciples suffered, and theological appropriations of Jesus as peacemaker are numerous – but this is only one side of the coin. *The Matrix* provides an interesting contemporary intertext for understanding the connection between Jesus and violence. Not only are Jesus and his disciples involved as primary actors in New Testament violence, but Jesus as messiah also allows, condones and even incites violence. His actions can be understood within the context of first-century forms of messianism, the era of the sword, and amidst the hegemonic presence of the Roman Empire. A brief look at the sword as symbol of violence, also divine violence, finally leads to a comparison between the sources and trends of violent behaviour in the relationship between messiahs and their followers, in the New Testament and *The Matrix*.*

### 1. Introduction: Monotheistic religion, the New Testament and violence

*Elective monotheism's preoccupation with the historical drama of the recipient community is explicitly built upon an assumption of necessary conflict and embattlement between those who serve the unique Creator and those who either do not know him or reject him (Jaffee 2001:773).*

The investigation of the links between Christianity, the New Testament texts, and violence, shows that, contrary to the general opinion of the majority of adherents of the world's religions, religion and violence do not make for strange bedfellows at all. In his discussion of obstacles regarding the problematic nature of genuine dialogue between Christianity and Judaism, Neusner (1991:105-116) argues that all religious systems has an *incapacity* to think about the Other or outsiders! In fact, it is commonly accepted that religious faith contributes to a particularist identity (Beyer 1994:3), which can and does lead to violence against those identified as the Others.

The ability of monotheistic religions to allow, and even more, to engender violence in their socio-political if not intellectual lives, is well attested and –documented. Whether monotheism's link with violence is brought about by an exclusive community which was formed in response to an eclectic divinity (Jaffee 2001), or by a broader and pervading sense of exclusivism as response to a sense of "one-ness" (Schwarz 1997), violence accompanies monotheistic religion notwithstanding claims to (superior?) moral values.

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Monotheism with its insistence not so much on a single god as on one “defining principle” carries within itself the seeds of exclusivism, contributing both to a collective identity where human beings are defined in terms of “us” and “them”, and ultimately also to the violence generated by such notions (Schwartz 1997; cf Schillebeeckx 1997:132-133). Or in the words of Jaffee, “The possession of divine love, at least at the level of the historical testimony to its presence within the community, is itself the warrant for ontological hatred of the very existence of the Other” (2001:774).

This tendency towards exclusion, of defining “the Other”, derives according to Schwartz, from the strict – read, intolerant – monotheism presented in biblical narratives. Exemplified in the account of Abel’s slaying by Cain, she shows how the biblical traditions espouse an exclusionary identity, an identity that is often *violently* exclusive. Monotheism and the “paradigms of one-ness” it breeds, spawning a demand for exclusive allegiance to one God, one People, one Land or one Nation, permeate the collective identity founded in violence, against outsiders. These biblical narratives and especially the particular way in which they were appropriated and dissipated in and for Christian identity, pervade many cultures where the wide-ranging influence of the Bible persists. The appropriated biblical narratives subsequently influence and pervade “deep cultural assumptions about how collectives are imagined – with collective hatred, with collective degradation, and with collective abuse”.

To be fair, in the first-century Mediterranean world violence was part of everyday life, the extent of which emerges clearly even from a brief analysis of the New Testament vocabulary. While the vocabulary for violence is used for different purposes, referring to physical human violence, to the cosmic struggle between good and evil, and metaphorically to the Christian’s life of service to God (a spiritual battle), it is evident that military terms dominate (Desjardins 1997:63-64), indicative of an imperialistic context. Going beyond the military setting, however, the “naturalisation of violence” in the first-century Mediterranean context has often been commented upon (cf Botha 2000:8-18). Violence in different forms is common in an agonistic society where the exercise of power – as the ability to exercise control over the behaviour of others – is an important social and means value as well (Pilch 1993:139-142).

Notwithstanding the emphasis on non-physical violence, four aspects which reinforces the violent perspective of the New Testament are often pointed out: An unquestioning acceptance of soldiers and war; extreme violence expected to occur at the end of this age; male domination in society as reflected in these texts; and, the insider-outsider mentality which divides humanity into opposing groups (Desjardins 1997:62, 78-108). An important consideration for understanding the complexity of the violence portrayed in the New Testament, is the role played by Jesus Christ as the messiah. In fact, amid claims that, “Viewed as God’s agent on earth (or his ambassador to humanity), Jesus himself occasionally accepts, condones or incites violence” (Desjardins 1997:72), the way in which the messianic position of Jesus<sup>2</sup> contributes to violence is generally not adequately accounted for. This is the focus of my paper.<sup>3</sup>

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2. Postponing the question whether Jesus’ messianic role was perceived as earthly, political or transcendental, spiritual (Mendels 1992:227-229, 262), and the corresponding positions about the Land (Mendels 1992:252), the oppositional nature of the messianic role remains, posing a threat to the (variety of) authorities and their demands for obedience.
  3. Mine is a restricted aim, limited to scriptural presentation and portrayal, excluding full discussions of the historical Jesus and the nature of his relationship with socio-religious formations in 1st century Palestine, as well as Jesus’ and early Christian formations’ views about the material and/or spiritual nature of God’s sovereignty vis-à-vis territoriality and statehood. For important notes and helpful, if not exhaustive, bibliographies in this regard, cf Mendels (1992:252-275).

## 2. Sacred scriptures, Messiahs, and violence

*The Bible seeks to answer a lot of relevant questions for man [sic]. In the film [sc. The Matrix] we refer to the dream of Nebuchadnezzar; he has a dream he can't remember but keeps searching for the answer. Then there's the whole idea of a Messiah. It's not just a Judeo-Christian myth; it also plays into the search for the reincarnation of the Buddha* (Larry Wachowski, quoted in Corliss 2000).

Although both a “Book religion” and a messianic religion,<sup>4</sup> Christianity and its inheritors cannot claim a unique position for either its Book or its messiah. In Christianity, the link between the Bible and Jesus Christ is of vital importance, although the often-dominant position of the Book has in the past been challenged. Ricoeur (1979:271), for example, argued that Christianity does not have a holy book but rather a holy person, namely Jesus Christ, as the messiah. Still, the notions of messiah and book – at least then today – are closely interrelated, reciprocally functioning to provide content and rationale to one another.<sup>5</sup> This seems to be suggested also by the directors of *The Matrix*,<sup>6</sup> in the quote above.

The attraction of biblical themes and narratives for use in Hollywood films can be linked as much with the insatiable appetite of twenty-first century audiences for the vivid portrayal of violence and sex,<sup>7</sup> as with cultural conditioning. Especially as far as violence is concerned, the Bible provides themes and narratives which can, with a little imagination and some artificial enhancement such as stunts and computer graphics, easily form the background or suggest outlines for riveting narrative plots. An important note should not be relegated to the bottom of the page, though. Rather than vilifying modern art and media for acting as the promoter of an – often ill-defined sense of – decadency, bad morals and being in deliberate contrast to the Bible<sup>8</sup>, the intertextual exploration of biblical allusions in contemporary artistic expressions can in fact be enlightening for the reception (and reception history) of biblical narratives, themes and ideas.<sup>9</sup>

Although *The Matrix* can hardly be claimed as Christian propaganda aimed at evangelism and piety, the film explores themes that are not unknown to the biblical texts and contexts, as much as it investigates the role of the messiah in changing worlds and

4. Noting the differences when compared to Christianity, forms of messianic longing if not belief were already found in strands of Second Temple Judaism (cf e.g. Dan 7:13-14, Zech 9:9) and by the time of Maimonides (1135-1204) the expectation of a messiah was confirmed in the 12th of his 13 articles of faith (Limburg 1987:147-150). However, cf Neusner (1993) on the reasons why the messianic is absent from the Mishnah, reappearing – and in a different role as sage, enabling Israel to achieve sanctification, rather than an agent of human achievement focused on liberation – only in the 4th century, which saw Israel turning to learn the lessons of history in the Palestinian (Jerusalem) Talmud.
5. Cf Jaffee who identifies in his comparative analysis of the Book-religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), the form of divine self-disclosure in Christianity as Jesus Christ the historical person, whereas with the other two traditions it is through texts (Torah and Qur'ân) (2001:763, 766). Nevertheless, the close relationship of Scripture and messiah for people today suggests some form of enscripturalised identity, with a scripturally identified messiah, and adherents' relationship to Christ scripturally inscribed. Enscripturalised identity is also suggested through the importance of scriptural images for (post) modern identities.
6. For a synopsis of the movie, cf the Appendix.
7. That public opinion allows and desires vivid portrayals of violence in mainstream cinemas yet relegate similar explicit expressions of sex to X-rated, sex-cinemas, makes for some comment on our society and its norms, and is worthy of more investigation – especially given our societies rife with violence.
8. A new understanding of the Bible and other sacred scriptures, is in any case becoming increasingly important in order to appreciate and appropriate them in the twenty-first century. Cf Punt (2001).
9. Cf e.g. Goodacre (2000). A number of other debates and controversies are deliberately avoided here, such as whether modern art, and films in particular, mirror the violence already present in society, or contribute to and even stimulate it (cf however Warren 1997: esp 122-151).

realities. On the other side of the spectrum, the film with its emphasis on self-actualisation and breaking with that which inhibits the true self, can be seen as a challenge to religious patterns, beliefs and practices which entangle and constrain individual awareness and identity, and the ability to live a different life. An interesting question in this regard would be whether the film proposes a specific view of the messiah figure, which avoids stale religious categories.

In fact, I contend that the messianic theme in *The Matrix* is one which readily renders itself available for exploring and portraying violence of the non-physical but certainly also of the physical kind. *The Matrix* suggests itself as a useful dialogue partner through its contemporary approach to the connection between violence and a messianic figure, set within an imperial framework. The movie's nuanced intertextuality incorporates elements of scriptural and religious allusions to Christianity and biblical themes, and a central notion is the theme of "the One", a notion which is from the outset cloaked in extreme violence, to the death. This is understandable given that messiahs necessarily destabilise and eschatologically destroy empires, by positing a new order. However, the traditional portrayal – and an image certainly not foreign to the New Testament documents – is one of a peaceful, non-violent Jesus:

Jesus is the messiah, the evangelists insist, but he is a humble, non-military messiah who does not conquer through physical force. Despite being critical of social and political structures of his day he does not preach armed revolt (Desjardins 1997:20).

In claims for an entirely meek and mild Christ, the ambiguity of Scripture regarding the messiah is, however, collapsed. Is his preaching not in fact subversive, and is he not critical of social and political structures to the point of initiating their change, not excluding the possibility of physical force? Even if stopping short of claiming Jesus as a political revolutionary, one has to admit that the establishment of the day – social, political-economical as well as religious – did not escape his attention *or* intrusion. Abandoning the family model and its socio-cultural conventions, making ambiguous statements about paying taxes (Mt 22:15-22//Mk 12:13-17//Lk 20:20-26), questioning the Torah (e.g. Mk 2:23-27), entering Jerusalem the way he did and at the time he did (during the Passover festival of liberation from Egypt, Mt 21:1-11//Mk 11:1-11//Lk 19:28-44) and his actions in the Temple, the religious centre but also a political stronghold with the treasury (Mt 21:12-17//Mk 11:15-19//Lk 19:45-48), are elements which already suggest a subversive Jesus. Jesus was moreover proclaimed king of the Jews, spurring Herod on to infanticide according to Matthew's Gospel (2:16), a plaque sarcastically referred to him as king at his crucifixion, and in the New Testament he is frequently proclaimed as "saviour", a title which the Roman emperors eagerly claimed.<sup>10</sup>

From traditional theological appropriations Jesus is perhaps best known as a *victim* of violence, non-physical as well as physical, violence ranging from his attempted stoning to, finally, his death on the cross, which would become the ultimate symbol of violence<sup>11</sup>

10. Accusations leveled at Jesus at his trial as depicted in the Gospels, reveal a political agenda: obstructing the payment of taxes, threats re. the destruction of the Temple, and proclaiming himself king (cf Herzog 2000:219-232). On another level, Jesus and his followers disrupted the easy alliance of Hellenistic-Roman religious patterns with the well being of the Empire, challenging the concept of *religio*. In Roman law, *pietas* was the first and supreme national duty of citizens, and elevated a specific morality to a divine principle or will. And of course, when Christianity became state religion in the 4th century, the church took over this concept of *religio* (cf Schillebeeckx 1997:133ff).

11. But often spiritualised and depoliticised through dogma and/or pietist convention. Here the ambiguity of the NT texts also emerges, with Paul's claim that the crucifixion is contrary to the accepted wisdom of the world, which assumes violence gives power (1 Cor 1-2). Such ambiguity shows "the Scriptures as a textbook on the pathology of religion" (Baum 1975:62ff).

(Desjardins 1997:23). But because of overt and more sublime religious reasons and purposes, the traditional focus on violence inflicted upon Jesus often led to the exclusion of his contribution to violence. Jesus as messiah was also involved in the promotion of violence, at different levels and in many ways, even inflicting violence in the – not to be separated – socio-cultural, political and also religious spheres of life in first-century Palestine.

What was true for Jesus was certainly also the case for his followers, who are like their leader mostly presented as victims, often because of their leader. In fact, the clear prohibition against violence is paralleled by an appeal to willingly accept both physical and non-physical violence from others, requiring a new appreciation of their own needs and those of others, and deeming victory as that which is achieved through accepting rather than inflicting violence (Desjardins 1997:23; 61). On the other hand, the followers of Jesus also act as perpetrators of violence, not only in defence of Jesus' person as happened at his arrest but also in shunning him at the onset of danger to themselves. Later generations of followers of Jesus, such as Simon Peter, Paul and others do not shrink from using violence or the threat of violence to reign in recalcitrant followers or steadfast outsiders. The messiah is therefore not only involved in allowing violence, or even inciting and promoting violence, but also in legitimating violence: "Violence is forbidden ... but it is acceptable if God or Jesus inflicts it" (Desjardins 1997:82). A messianic claim seems to support the right to inflict violence.

The following two sections' attention to theoretical explanations of the link between messianism and violence is followed by a brief account of some New Testament texts related to messianic violence in dialogue with the portrayal of messianic violence in *The Matrix*.

## 2.1 The divine, violence and human society

Opinions on whether the New Testament's messiah promotes peace or advocates violence are as diverse and divided as the texts used to make such claims. Traditionally and overwhelmingly, the focus of messianic word and deed is found best described with reference to peace, often in connection with obvious and more sublime references to the calls of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible for peace,<sup>12</sup> well-illustrated with the application of the "prince of peace"-title (Is 9:6) to the messianic child (cf Geddert 1992:604). Many references can be listed in support of Jesus' call for peace, especially in Matthew's gospel where he is portrayed as urging his followers to be peacemakers (Mt 5:9) although it sometimes proved unsuccessful (Mt 10:34-37) and was costly (Mt 10:37-39).<sup>13</sup>

While promoting peace, the New Testament documents are at the same time cloaked in violence,<sup>14</sup> not only representative of the human condition of particularly the first century,

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12. As much as peace was central to the eschatological expectations of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, it would be preceded by an increase rather than a decrease or absence of violence and war, and generally follow the destruction of the enemies of Israel (e.g. Is 66:1-16).

13. Yoder (1994) and others claim that in the gospels Jesus explicitly exhorts his followers to adopt a pacifistic model of resistance rather than to opt for violent politics, challenging e.g. Brandon's thesis that Jesus was a revolutionary, a Zealot. Such pacifism is to inform also the early Christian church and modern Christians, so that the followers of Jesus become peacemakers in personal and political contexts. Cf Schillebeeckx's position that Jesus' message, actions and death was a protest against all violence, but realising on the other hand the historical violence of Christology, he adds that pneumatology can prevent christology from being violent (1997:141).

14. The insistence on peace or non-violence in the face of physical oppression is already tantamount to violence. "Keeping the status quo' is arguably a violent stance since it does little to reduce the social and financial inequalities that so often lie at the root of violent outbreaks" (Desjardins 1997:34). On the other hand, the non-pacifist stance of the NT can amount to

emphasised by the violence inflicted upon Jesus and his followers, but at times also advocating violence (Desjardins 1997:62). The close link between Jesus as messiah, and violence cannot be disguised when the gospel narratives are from the very beginning awash in violence accompanying him and his followers. This emerges clearly in Luke's gospel, where the explicit peacemaker beatitude as found in Matthew 5:9 is exchanged for a blessing for those willing to suffer because of Jesus (Lk 6:22). The notion of messianic victims permeates the gospel-narratives, emphasising the importance for Jesus' followers to take up their cross and follow him, championing the notion of justified suffering. They are not to resist violence flowing from the presence or actions of their leader, or evade violence directed at them through their relationship with him, including events surrounding his ultimate betrayal.

The systemic violence of *The Matrix* is challenged and therefore exacerbated by the advent of the messianic figure, Neo. In *The Matrix* the very notion that people's existence and consciousness, in fact, that their lives in all dimensions and facets are created for them and artificially manipulated is more blatantly violent than any of the spectacular gunfights. The imposition of a certain unconscious form of life on people without individual or any other form of choice in this regard, translates into slavery, even violent subjugation and hegemony, ultimate imperialism. Creating a reciprocal hermeneutical flow between the New Testament texts and *The Matrix* shows how traditional religious patterns and thought are reappropriated in a today's different context – and in a film text! – and suggests a rereading of the relationship between Jesus and his followers in a new, violent light. And this provides a link to violence in contemporary societies.

The normalisation of violence today can be ascribed to the violent legacy of post-Enlightenment with its inscription of the relationship between power and knowledge, inspired by a humanist impulse to “make ourselves masters and possessors of nature” (Descartes), and simultaneously justifying the destructive powers of Western rationality. The epistemological narcissism of Western culture is challenged by the early figure of Nietzsche, a challenge directed at two foundational humanist myths: the myth of pure origins, and the emancipatory myth of progress and teleology. Both myths are cast in violence, of the progressive kind, since reason found its inception in chance; devotion to truth and the precision of scientific methods arose from the passion of scholars, their reciprocal hatred, their fanatical and unending discussions, and their spirit of competition – their personal conflicts that slowly forged the weapons of reason (Foucault 1984:78).

The Cartesian project fails where it succumbs to the violence which begot it. Unable to emancipate and civilise, it rather initiates progressive deterioration, as the confident self-presence and aggressive certitude of the Self is troubled by an inescapable deficit and the persistent annoyances of doubt brought about by not knowing the Self's own limitations (Gandhi 1998:37-39).

Poststructuralist and postmodernist criticism of the Cartesian legacy is directed at the philosophy of identity and to an account of knowledge as power over objective reality.<sup>15</sup> The objection against the Cartesian philosophy of identity, concerns its ethically unsustainable premise of omitting the Other,<sup>16</sup> brought about by the violent negation of material and historical

the encouragement of violence and wars, with the only exhortation regarding the military that Christians should be good soldiers (Desjardins 1997:78-82).

15. Mastery (“Dare to know”, Descartes) is the reason for a bold, impudent, defiant, audacious exercising of knowledge. Postmodern and poststructuralist critics would prefer the motto “Care to know”(Gandhi 1998:41).
16. Not only the Other of the non-human world (Heidegger) but also categories of people defined through criminality, madness, disease, foreignness, homosexuality, strangers and women (Foucault), the “remainder” (Derrida), or those present in the singularity and plurality of the “event” (Lyotard) (cf Gandhi 1998:39-40).

alterity by the self-sufficient subject in its narcissistic craving to see the world in its own self-image, and this extends to the realm of religion as well. But the objection to Cartesian identity goes beyond a critique of delusion and oblivion, since the relationship with the omitted Other is violent and coercive, attributing a sense of danger to alterity which, again, requires violent repression of all symptoms of cultural difference – as was probably most clearly seen in the colonial civilising mission. Postcolonialism, together with postmodernism, attempts to resist this *dépassement* or overcoming, the equalising action of particular cultural identities to privilege a universal civic identity (Lyotard, in Gandhi 1998:39-41).

The modernist politics of identity in the Western world, where since the earliest times religious notions and concerns informed cultures and societies, co-opted religion, often consciously and overtly and at times more sublimely. Today's Western societies and culture(s) can hardly be understood without due recognition for the influence of religious, and in particular Christian, elements in their thought and action, theories and worldviews, as is so evident in *The Matrix*. And violence follows not far behind religion, already expressed in Durkheim's notion that violence is the left hand of the divine.<sup>17</sup> His theory holds that society began with religion – “[r]eligion is society becoming conscious of itself” (Baum 1975:86) – and the sacred is the “exemplification of the power of the society”, requiring both devotion and obligation (Giddens 1978:92). Where for Durkheim the sacrificial system is about establishing communion with the divine, Girard claims that “[v]iolence gave birth to religion, and religion has served to keep violence in check” (Desjardins 1997:114). Religion provides the community with a mechanism to stabilize itself through the management of the violence created within its own structures, and to secure peace through the violent option of scapegoating (cf Häring 1997:278-280). Girard's thesis relies partly on the notion that violent tendencies are part of human nature coupled with a community's development of strategies such as religion to control violence, and partly on Freud's theory of religion. For Girard a “single act of mob-violence in primordial times” is the cause of all religions. Communal remembering and mimetic reliving of that act through community-chosen scapegoats divert natural human aggression away from the community and simultaneously strengthens the community and its socio-cultural order.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, the presence of violence does not therefore necessarily promote it but could, along with calls for peace, encourage people to transform themselves instead of others, and to move out of the scapegoat-cycle and a life determined by violence. This leads Desjardins (1997:114) to discount the validity of Girard's scapegoat-thesis for understanding the issues of peace and violence although admitting to its pragmatic nature in providing a “legitimate” outlet for violence rather than imposing an “impossible” non-violent attitude.<sup>19</sup> Various attempts at using Girard's theory for interpreting the texts on violence in the Bible

17. Walter Benjamin distinguishes between human and divine violence, claiming that divine violence is necessary to stop all other violence: God conquers the hostile forces. Conversely, the conformist is posited as the Antichrist; and the Matrix and all those tied to it are caught up in the ultimate act of conforming.

18. Recently, cf Girard (1993:339-352). For another recent appropriation of Girard's theory, cf Hallman (1993:81-93) on Girard, Augustine and the notion of original sin.

19. His unease with this theory relates to its proponents' failure to deal adequately with the New Testament documents, and imposing what he perceives as religious bias on an otherwise complex situation. So also, Dar (1993:357-367). The NT authors encourage peace, while the violence contained within the documents often goes unacknowledged by the authors, and there is no indication of these authors attempting to integrate peace and violence (Desjardins 1997:120). Amid appreciation for Girard's contribution to theology (e.g. Peters 1992:151-181), cf for criticism of his theory as limited to “horizontal violence” (i.e. between equals), Dewey (1993:353-355); as an uninvestigated and potentially dangerous “theological position”, Dunnill (1996:105-119); and, as too “universalist”, Stivers (1993:505-538).

include Williams<sup>20</sup> (1991) and Hamerton-Kelly<sup>21</sup> (1992) who have illustrated how Girard's thesis could be applied in reading the Old and New Testaments respectively, and Schwager (1987) who interpreted both Testaments according to Girard's theory. Useful elements in his theory have been indicated by these and other scholars for explaining elements of the violence and related issues in the New Testament, and in the context of this paper, it is not difficult to see how the messiah can become the ultimate scapegoat. But one has to go beyond the violence suffered by the messiah.

## 2.2 The New Testament, messiah, and violence

*It is not the presence of violence that is remarkable, however, but its promotion. The acceptable New Testament model allows for both physical and non-physical violence to be inflicted upon others ... The God of the New Testament is violent. So is Jesus, although to a lesser extent* (Desjardins 1997:109).

The socio-historical context for much of the New Testament is provided in Second Temple Judaism (roughly 587 BCE to 135 CE), where the destruction of the temple and the loss of the Davidic monarchy saw the development of (forms of) messianism, "the history of speculations about a royal or priestly leader chosen by God", although versions of the expectation of a messiah were neither uniform nor common to all Jewish groups<sup>22</sup> (Grabbe 1992:143,552; cf Ferguson 1993:517). Kingship as a nationalistic symbol of Jewish political and spiritual sovereignty in their own land gradually transformed into a "more pure, spiritual and holy symbol" (Mendels 1992:231-233). And while revolt against the Romans did not necessarily require eschatological fervour and messianic belief, the refusal to accept Roman rule mostly implied belief in God's rule. In the social and political turmoil of first-century Palestine, and with much fluidity and change in religious thought and practice, messianic expectations and eschatology were nevertheless important influences among certain popular movements and groups of revolutionaries, such as the Sicarii and groups of bandits as for example described by Josephus.

The Zealots, Sicarii and other disaffected groups held to the notion of a charismatic, military leader,<sup>23</sup> who could, with the help of God and/or a messiah-figure, overcome the occupying forces and inaugurate a theocratic nation, faithful to the Law (cf Riches 1980:172). They believed that God alone should be king of Israel, with no obedience given to any temporal authority. Frustration mounted when the whole Land came under direct Roman rule in 44 CE and it became clear the Romans had no intention of changing the

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20. Elsewhere, Williams has provided a broader evaluation of Girard's theory and important issues involved in its evaluation (1988:320-326).

21. Recently, Hamerton-Kelly has gone one step further by suggesting that the "scapegoat-theory" can be useful for explaining ethnic violence in South Africa (1994:23-40).

22. Expectation of an anointed royal Jewish leader are scarce in the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Jer 23:5-6; Is 11:2-9; Mic 5:2), only a few instances of a future Davidic king are found in the period of Persian and Hellenistic domination (e.g. Sir 47:11, 22; 1 Macc 2:57), with only a mild increase of hope for an anointed royal leader during the Hasmonean period and some messianic movements arising in reaction to Archelaus' brutality (Heard 1992:589:691; however, cf Beuken 1993:3-13). After the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by 70 CE, the notion of a heavenly Jerusalem and Temple increases in importance and the role of a messiah become more pronounced (cf 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch) to the extent that some rabbi's interpreted Simeon Bar Kokhba, leader of the revolt of 132-135 CE as the king-messiah (Mendels 1992:371-378, 389). Gradually also the importance of faith and piety among the Jewish people replaced the notion of national suffering as the condition for the coming of the messiah (Limburg 1987:149). In the period of 63 BCE to 70 CE, two differently shaped patterns for messianic figures are found: the political figure of messiah the son of David, and the transcendental messiah (Mendels 1992:225-230).

23. Zealots killed the Jerusalem leader Menahem presumably for his messianic aspirations (Grabbe 1992:501, 549).



political dispensation (Mendels 1992:252). Usurping power had to be destroyed by all means, violently if necessary. God's followers were to join an earthly army to get rid of the oppressors of Israel and restore its purity before God, since he was viewed as a warrior who would assist his followers to destroy his (their) enemies (Riches 1980:93-94). At the same time, strife and fighting among Jewish revolutionary groups themselves were common (Grabbe 1992:449-500; Heard 1992:696-697), and can apart from other considerations be related to the conflicting aspirations of oppressed groups, aimed at strengthening their own positions whether in opposition to or in collaboration with the oppressor.

The claim is not that such notions of divine and especially messianic violence are (fully) representative of the first-century Jewish world, or that such notions necessarily had a direct influence on the authors of the New Testament texts. Nevertheless, the presence of Jewish perceptions regarding the time of the messiah as a period of the sword, the linking the days of the messiah with violence, formed part of the socio-historical setting and thought-world from which the New Testament emerged, and was therefore likely to have left traces or echoes of influence in the latter: The issue of the messiah was in the air (cf Evans 1992:239-252; Freyne 1993: 30-41). And while first-century Jewish groups nurtured belief about the "days of the messiah" rather than making a person or his functions central, the notion of a messiah became a central category in early Christianity through the figure of Jesus Christ (Ferguson 1993:519).

It is then not surprising that Jesus was typecast in the role of liberator as attested by scenes from the Gospel accounts, although, almost contradictorily, the gospel authors are united in their tendency to traverse these *explicit* claims about Jesus.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, Jesus is consistently presented as the messiah, the Christ, in word and deed, and whether as political figure or as spiritual messiah, violence forms part of the equation. In Luke's gospel, for example, Jesus' birth is announced with reference to violence, which will come to characterise his life and those close to him (*kai sou [de] auths thn psuchn dieleusetai romfaia*, 2:35).<sup>25</sup> But Jesus also becomes a divine warrior, leading his followers into battle against Satan's kingdom (10:17-19). Even more explicitly, Jesus spells out the implications of his ministry: "Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division" (*dokei te hoti eirhnhn paregenomhn dounai en th(i) gh(i)? Ouchi, legw humin, all' h diamerismon*, 12:51),<sup>26</sup> leaving households and families divided (12:52-53). Practically it means, leaving behind your life as you have known it, denying parents and family and taking on the cross, and therefore the following advice from Jesus: "And let him who has no sword sell his mantle and buy one" (*kai ho mh echwn pwlhsato to himation autou kai agorasato machairan*, 22:36b).<sup>27</sup>

24. The spiritual nature of Jesus' messiahship is often inferred from passages such as Mt 20:25-28; 22:41-46; 25:31-34; Mk 14:3-9; Lk 22:24-30 and various instances in John's gospel, esp 18:33-40 (cf Mendels 1992:228-229).

25. Apart from 6 times in Rev, this is the only other use of *romfaia* in the rest of the NT. This statement is often taken as a prophetic or eschatological reference to the eventual fate of Jesus, and the anguish that Mary will endure as Jesus' mother (e.g. Michaelis 1968:995). Possible intertexts are Sib 3:316; Ezek 14:17 (the sword as symbol for God's punishment on land) and Ps 36:15 (the wicked destroyed by having their swords turned on themselves).

26. In Mt 10:34, *diamerismon* (division) is replaced by *machairan* (sword).

27. The reluctance to view this statement as a call to take up arms against the evil forces is borne out in descriptions of this verse as ironic, symbolic or unhistorical, at most referring to the impending hostility which the disciples of Jesus will experience (so Geddert 1997:605). And ambiguity remains, illustrated by Jesus' claim that those who take up the sword, will perish by it (cf Lk 21:53 but Mt 26:52b; cf Rev 13:10), taken as referring to acts of violence, rather than the penal power of the state (Rev 13:4) or military service (Michaelis 1967:525 n11).

### 3. The sword, and the gun: Contemporary symbols

The first-century instrument as well as symbol for violence of different kinds, is the sword, expressed in the New Testament by *machaira*<sup>28</sup> (28 times) or *romfaia*<sup>29</sup> (7 times)<sup>30</sup> and used more often than any other term for violence (Desjardins 1997:63-64). Can one, however, as easily as Michaelis (1967:526) dispel the connection with (later) Jewish perceptions of the time of the messiah as a period of the sword, because a saying of Jesus such as in Mt 10:34 is taken to refer to his followers' willingness to endure enmity? Or can one dismiss as mere readiness for self-sacrifice<sup>31</sup> Jesus' instruction to the disciples (Lk 22:35ff) to choose a *machaira* rather than a cloak, to surrender all possessions but not avoid fighting, simply because he elsewhere may disapprove of the aggressive use of weapons? The eschatological dimension seems to nudge towards the messianic requirement for violence, especially within the apocalyptic scenario presupposed in the New Testament writings.

The sword as the symbol for violence in the New Testament, is likewise the symbol of divine judgement and punishment, and so becomes the instrument of divine violence. Not only is violent death ascribed to the use of a *machaira* (Heb 11:34, cf 1 Ki 19:1ff; Heb 11:37, cf 1 Ki 19:10; Jer 26:23), but it can also be a divine instrument (Lk 21:24), and representative of the power of government (Ac 12:2). The contemporary symbol of violence in *The Matrix* is the gun, and it is equally pervasive and representative of twentieth-century violence.<sup>32</sup> The messianic notion stimulates enthusiasm among adherents, which can under fertile circumstances encourage violent actions aimed at ensuring the messianic claims and position, protecting the messiah from external onslaughts. Jesus is defended by Peter against Malchus with a sword (Mt 26:47//Mk 14:43) as Neo is defended by Morpheus and Trinity in separate encounters by guns against the agents. However, whereas Neo's messianic figure is cemented in his ability, towards the end of the film, to both use the gun effectively and, conversely, to withstand its use by the agents, the most violent instrument Jesus picked up according to the New Testament was a *fraggelion* (whip, Jn 2:15).

In the later documents of the New Testament, the messianic politics of Jesus is increasingly spiritualised, and in Ephesians the Word of God has become a spiritual sword (*machaira*, Eph 6:17)<sup>33</sup> with which to defend oneself (Michaelis 1967:526). In Hebrews, the Word of God surpasses the sharpest of swords (Heb 4:12),<sup>34</sup> and in related way, Heb 7:27 portrays Jesus as the final but ultimate sacrifice, ending the efficacy of Israel's sacrificial system: an act of overwhelming, self-annihilating love for creation. The end of the sacrificial system meant no more animal- or other material sacrifices, but did not mean a life without

28. A word linked to *machomai* and *machh*, used for physical combat in a military sense. Contrary to the nature of the words or their use in the LXX, they have a negative ring in the NT and believers are rather to *agwnizesthai* or *elegchein* (Bauernfeind 1967:528).

29. *Romfaia* is often (more than 230 times) found in the LXX, and corresponds almost exclusively to the Hebrew *hrv* (Michaelis 1968:993).

30. These two terms that are rare in other literature have a wide range of usage in LXX. Generally the former is used for a small sword and the latter for a long sword; both were also possibly used for a dagger or a knife; and at times employed metaphorically (Michaelis 1967:524-525).

31. "Coupled with this clear prohibition against violence is a willingness to accept it from others, even to the point of death" (Desjardins 1997:61).

32. Given the high level of technological sophistication that would in other films in the genre have called for more advanced weapons such as laser guns, it bears reminding that the film deals with constructed 20th century "reality".

33. The intertext may be Is 11:4 (cf 2 Th 2:8), although in Isaiah it is the messiah who with the "word of his mouth" will smite the earth (Michaelis 1967:526 n22). Interestingly, in Christian art Paul is often depicted with a sword.

34. The sword in Heb 4:12 – *machaira* here is probably the knife used by priest, butcher or surgeon – does not punish and destroy, but "pitilessly ... disclose the thoughts of the heart of man [sic]" (Michaelis 1967:526-527).

oblation for believers. In fact, the “necessity” of suffering to the point of bleeding (*mechris haimatos*, 12:4) is stressed, with the accompanying image of a God who bestows punishment signifying the legitimacy of children (“sons”, 12:8), although well-intended, i.e. to the advantage of those involved and contributing to their sanctity (12:10), followed by a general and bland statement that punishment bears fruit for those willing to succumb to it (12:11), willingly (12:9) and allowing themselves to be moulded by it (12:11).

But it is Revelation which connects the sword with Jesus Christ the messiah in a particularly strong way, having the *romfaia* (sword) coming from his mouth (Rev 1:16; 2:16; 19:15, 21). This amounts to four of the six times *romfaia* is used in Revelation.<sup>35</sup> Rev 1:16a *kai ek tou stomatos autou romfaia distomos oxeia ekporeuomenh* is somewhat different from Heb 4:12, since Jesus is here a judge who watches over his churches and necessarily judges and punishes by his word. In Rev 19:15 a similar notion is found, with Jesus as the rider on the white horse advancing at the head of his armies as the heavenly king and *kurios*.<sup>36</sup>

Was Jesus’ call to discipleship in fact meant for everyone as Riches (1980:101) and various others contend, initiated by shared meals with others than the purified few? And was this indeed instrumental in changing the notion of the “Kingdom of God” from a militaristic and ritualistic concept into a new metaphorical association? Did Jesus’ call not also deliberately – or with its exclusivist claims, implicitly – exclude some people for religious and other reasons, both creating outsiders and making enemies? And on the other hand, can Jesus’ self-awareness be described as that of a *spiritual* messiah, and the notion that “Jesus, according to the New Testament, wished to be seen as a spiritual Messiah” (Mendels 1992:262), be maintained as an accurate reading of the Gospel narratives, not to mention the rest of the New Testament?

#### 4. *The Matrix, the messiah and violence*

In *The Matrix* there are two settings, both also clearly recognisable in the New Testament, which lead to and continuously stimulate violence, namely the insider-outsider context and the eschatological-apocalyptic<sup>37</sup> charged situation. The silver thread running through these two aspects is the messianic theme, which both contributes to if not generate opposition

35. In Rev 2:12 Christ has a 2-edged sword; 5 instances thus refer to *romfaia* in connection with the messiah. The only literal use is Rev 6:8 where the sword with famine, pestilence and wild animals of earth kill a ¼ of the earth’s population, cf Ezek 5:17 and 14:21 for 2 series of 4 plagues; with *romfaia* there is a threefold series of plagues in Jer 14:12; 21:7; 24:10; etc; cf also 15:2; and a twofold series in 2 Chron 20:9, cf Jer 49:16 and Ezek 7:15. Michaelis (1968:998) argues that the OT *romfaia* passages which emphasise violence and vengeance influences the NT in Revelation only, and more particularly in Rev 6:8. The notion of the sword as *distomos* (two-edged) and *oxeia* (sharp) is found also in the LXX, with both *machaira* (e.g. Prov 5:4 and Is 49:2) and *romfaia* (e.g. Ps 149:6 and Ezek 5:1). A word (*logos* and *rhma*) is also indicated as an instrument of punishment and destruction (e.g. Is 11:4; Hos 6:5) but is not called a weapon and certainly not a sword; a “tongue” can however be a *machaira* (e.g. Ps 56:5) and a *romfaia* (Ps 63:4); cf Is 49:2 *kai ethhken to stoma mou hwsei machairan oxeian*, he made my mouth like a sharp sword.

36. Michaelis (1968:998) concludes from this that the only weapon used by Christ is the Word; cf e.g. in Wisdom of Solomon 18:22.

37. In the apocalyptic tradition, the battle to introduce the Kingdom was a more pronounced dualism between the forces of Satan and those of God. In the Qumran tradition, for example, the “children of the light” considered themselves the only “saved” remnant, thus consigning everyone else, Jew or Gentile, who was not of the Community, to the “children of darkness”. The chosen would finally be vindicated when, with the appearance of two messiahs, of Aaron (priestly) and Israel (kingly) and a prophet, and the intervention of God’s heavenly hosts, true worship would be restored to Israel, inaugurating the perfect Kingdom (Riches 1980:173-174). In *The Matrix* the aim is to liberate Zion (the resistance’s main frame computer), to establish it as the New Kingdom for all humans, implying the full and final destruction of the anti-forces of the Matrix.

groups, and the appearance of the person who initiates the countdown towards the anticipated final conflict. The messianic theme, which is present in both these two settings although often applied differently, contributes directly to the overt and covert manifestations of violence, bringing it to maximum levels. Two features which can be said to highlight the acceptance, condoning and incitement of violence by Jesus and his followers are the angry, self-righteous tone<sup>38</sup> heard in the New Testament, and the assumption that violence is required to bring about positive change (Desjardins 1997:66-78). These two features are also part and parcel of the group around Neo in *The Matrix*.

As much as Jesus' followers believed his presence to have dealt a crippling blow to the forces of evil and with the final victory in sight, so too are Morpheus and his compatriots convinced that with Neo's acceptance of his messianic role, the days of the Matrix are numbered. Such an eschatological and apocalyptic worldview requires violence as prerequisite to inaugurate the new "kingdom", with the expectation of horrific violence inflicted by the forces of evil only matched by their opponents' determination to counteract these actions through violence, too. "Simply put: since God is our model and he solves his problems through violence, so can we". The apocalyptic worldview has little room for acknowledging the equal worth of everyone, friend or foe, and has "no intention to build a better world with opportunities for everyone" (cf Desjardins 1997:91; cf 84). Whereas, "[i]n dying Jesus refused to repay violence with violence. He forgives those who kill him violently" (Schillebeeckx 1997:140), Neo in *The Matrix* destroys his enemies.

Other groups in Palestine such as the Pharisees shared the views current at Qumran regarding the upholding of the Law and observing purity regulations, but the inauguration of the Kingdom of God, it was believed, would be brought about by observing the regulations of the Torah, as well as the Oral Tradition (Riches 1980:95). These ideas were expressed even stronger in the actions of the revolutionary movements mentioned above. Sentiments and actions of separation such as these ensured a strong insider-outsider mentality, where the Other was not only those people with different ideas but those who could prove a problem either for the insiders' purity or for the imminence of the Kingdom.<sup>39</sup>

In *The Matrix* Neo, as the messiah, is as much involved in direct violence as his followers, both in violence enacted towards the enemies or the outsiders and in being the reason for violence directed at his followers. From the start, it is clear that Neo has a problem with authority and its structures, working against "The Company" (5.0:11.49), and is as a hacker already rebellious and anti-empire. The messianic task is not that the sole responsibility of ridding the world of evil is to be assumed by the messiah, but Neo, like Jesus, is to lead his followers into the ultimate battle against the imperialist forces. *The Matrix* differs from the New Testament in suggesting that the messiah's followers play a larger part in achieving his goal, and quietist martyrdom which both allocates responsibility to another, higher power and calls it into action, is foreign to the film's plot.

As in the New Testament where non-physical violence predominates among the many forms of violence revealing itself (Desjardins 1997:62), non-physical violence in *The Matrix* is similarly overwhelmingly. The captured state of human bodies as well as the physical force used on – and by – the dissidents are violent and destructive to say the least, but even then it does not come close to the non-physical aspect of being alive but unable to

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38. According to Desjardins, it was the result of the early Christians' lack of success in proselytising among Jews despite their own Jewish roots, and the increasing failure of Christian missionary activity elsewhere, too (1997:66-70).

39. Since according to the NT Jesus challenged stereotyped symbols, giving them a new and liberating meaning, he became also a danger to the "insiders" for whom this proved revolutionary, challenging and simply unacceptable at times.

live, enslaved for the purposes of those in power. *The Matrix's* interpretation of the relationship between the messiah and violence suggests a stronger link between the two than traditionally perceived of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, indeed, a reciprocal relationship, where the messiah's actions contribute to violence and is directed, not least of all, to his followers. On the other hand, the messiah is simultaneously also a victim, brought about by the expectations of his followers and their actions in this regard, leading to violence directed at the messiah.<sup>40</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

*The Matrix* can be seen as valuable commentary on, and a reworking of religious and biblical themes, evidencing an adaptation of already present religious notions among the film's audiences. Beyond its interesting appropriation of biblical themes and allusions, it provides a contemporary and non-conformist investigation of biblical material, in particular highlighting the interrelationship between messianic figures, their followers and violence,<sup>41</sup> a relationship often neglected in studies on the messiah and violence in the New Testament. In the public media of a violence-soaked world, where sexual, religious and other taboos often, ironically, carry more censure than viewing violence – as suggested by the coding and ratings imposed on audiovisual media – the Bible is evidently still found useful in its ambiguity to condone and sustain expressive violence (cf Punt 1999). *The Matrix* becomes a metaphor for humankind reaching beyond itself, in search for a better world, beyond an illusionary reality, foreseen to be mediated by a messiah but, as such, a process which will necessarily entail violence.<sup>42</sup> The complex of ideas surrounding the messiah is firmly held in place by a legacy characterised by violence, epitomised in the cross, as well as through rituals or sacraments (baptism as dying and rising; communion as the body and blood of Jesus), and also religious festivals around Jesus, some more peaceful (Christmas, although the slaughter of the infants are not far off) than others such as Easter (celebrating the death of Jesus).

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40. The destruction of the Matrix by the One and his followers becomes the condition and therefore ultimate (theological) metaphor for a new life in all its facets and features. Liberating humans from the Matrix cannot happen sectionally or by category, are not limited to certain areas of the human experience and life, but is all encompassing and totalising – it is all or nothing!

41. I have explored the biblical and especially the messianic allusions in *The Matrix* in more detail in a paper, "Victimised Messiah or messianic victims? Biblical allusion in *The Matrix*", due to appear as a chapter in a Sheffield Academic Press volume in 2003.

42. The movie has also given cause to some conspiracy theory authors such as David Icke (2001) to argue that *The Matrix* is much more than a movie script, but in fact reflects our reality. The life that *we* live and think that *we* live is but an illusion, while our lives are controlled by an inter-dimensional, subterranean, reptilian race. For Icke it is then also but a short step towards confirming the illuminati conspiracy, the Rothchild family's control over Israel, and the Holocaust "industry" (à la Finkelstein).

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**Appendix: Synopsis of *The Matrix***

*The Matrix*, written and directed by Larry and Andy Wachowski, was produced in 1999 by Warner Brothers. It is a science-fiction thriller whose story line is determined by the quest of a few people to subvert and hopefully overturn the world in which people think (or, “believe”) that they live. The world, however, is really a computer generated illusion called the Matrix and thus nothing else but virtual reality, based on artificial intelligence. *The Matrix* portrays the human quest for the true self, attempting to break free from those mechanisms and processes, which inhibit human freedom. More than a benign illusion, and in order to sustain their power and to derive the necessary energy for their exploits, the villains in the guise of “machines” or computers who have taken over the world keep human beings in an artificially induced and perpetual sleep-like state. This is really a kind of subconscious existence artificially created and manipulated through information technology: a counterfeit and feigned world induced by computers as virtual reality, which replaced the real world. The machines initially lived off solar power, but after people destroyed it in the fight against the machines, they now run on the bio-electricity of human bodies; therefore, humans are grown to supply in the need. While the machines derive their energy from human bodies, people are kept content with the illusion or delusion, created through technology, that they are living *real* lives in the *real* world. The film’s plot centres on one small group of dissidents led by Morpheus who have with the help of the original programmer, through the right knowledge or belief *and* by sheer will power, managed to liberate themselves from both the illusion and their attraction to it. They live in a different and unavoidably threatening, treacherous and violent world. More particularly, this small group of liberated people is in search of a leader – *the One* – a messiah with specific qualities, who will ultimately set all people free from their enslavement to the Matrix and its power. Freeing people’s minds require the violent destruction of the Matrix, since for as long as it exists, the human race will never be free. The result is a blend of the real and the fantastical, reality and illusion, as a matter of course.