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Donnie Darko and the Messianic Motif

Abstract

Savior or deliverer movies are a staple in today's theaters. Often they are action/adventure films where they tend to substitute action for character development. In the first background section I will use an ancient Hindu epic to demonstrate that this is by no means novel. But there have also been richer films that are psychologically, religiously, and often politically, savvy. Many have been examined in this journal, including *Cool Hand Luke*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and the highly provocative *Breaking the Waves*. The last especially points to a particular category of savior film, the Messianic, modeled primarily on the Christian story of Jesus of Nazareth. Rooted in Jewish mythology, this foundational Christian myth, understood a particular way, tells of an unlikely, misunderstood, and even rather foolish savior figure, who is properly appreciated by his followers only after this community finally becomes aware of the effects of his ultimate sacrifice. I will flesh this out a little also in the first background section. I will then turn to *Donnie Darko*, contending that this film should stand with the best of this genre. Besides having a compelling storyline and clever subplots, it introduces novel elements in the Christ story, particularly in the scope of the messianic sacrifice and in the surprising absence of any resurrection.

Background 1

Powerful saviors and deliverers have been ubiquitous in religious myths. Think of Rama in the Hindu story, the *Ramayana*. Born an incarnation of Vishnu in order to vanquish the arrogant and wicked rakshasa, Ravana, who is throwing the cosmos into imbalance by disrupting the holy sacrifices performed by human beings to honor the gods, Rama, already at only sixteen years old, triumphs over the terrible yakshi, Tataka, and then over her powerful avengers, including her son, Maricha, to restore the sanctity of a sacrifice. Later, in his epic confrontation with the forces of Ravana, he battles the massive Kumbhakarna, as the latter is devouring hundreds of Rama's troops. Rama shoots five arrows - four removing his limbs and the fifth beheading him. Finally, weary and wounded, at the end of his strength, Rama pauses in his struggle with Ravana himself to worship the sun. His strength returns in time to release his most powerful weapon on Ravana, the Brahma missile, and it explodes Ravana's chest, killing him. Thereby cosmic and social order is restored, at least for the present.

It is not too far a stretch from ancient heroes like Rama to many of the superheroes in today's "blockbuster" movies. They must face, of course, their own heartbreakingly setbacks (Rama, for instance, is exiled for fourteen years from his kingdom on the very day on which he was to be coronated, and his wife, Sita, is abducted by Ravana while she is in exile with Rama and under his protection) and

whatever character flaws they may possess, but these are still largely plot devices; they are meant to involve us more in the story line than in a complex and evolving character.¹

There is no absolute division between a character-driven and an action-driven story, of course. One may turn to the other great Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*, to see how they may intimately co-exist. The co-existence here is partly because of this story's interest in karma. The *Mahabharata* needs to develop its characters more than the *Ramayana* because the final battle of the Pandava brothers, the superheroic redeemer figures, against their cousins, the Kauravas, is ultimately a confluence of a myriad of decisions that characters have made over the courses of their lives. As with the *Ramayana*, there is a kind of inevitability to this showdown, because the Kauravas represent a severe distorting of the cosmic and social order, or dharma. But what is of special interest in the story, is how so many participants are creating this inevitability by their free and seemingly unrelated choices.²

Either way, however, Hindu mythology, like most the world's myths, did not tend to focus on its heroes' perceived weaknesses, their apparent follies, if you will. But ancient Hebrew myths often did. By placing their saviors in situations where obedience to God runs counter to accepted wisdom and common sense, they give the listener or reader another perspective on the action and, necessarily, on the

character of the actors as well. This effect can be reinforced when the faith community itself is at odds with the individual called by God (something both Christianity and Islam adopted in their own ways, but distorted terribly when they used the stories to describe a putative innate disposition of the Jewish people to rebel) or when the chosen individual argues with almighty God about the wisdom of God's own plans (for obedience to God need not take the form of simple surrender). Moses, the archetypal prophet of God (Dt. 34:10) and the great lawgiver, was very resistant to God's calling to confront Pharoah and his armies, virtually alone, with the divine command to release from bondage his royal treasure of Hebrew slaves, and could argue with God passionately, as when he interceded for the survival of the children of Israel against God's decision to annihilate them because of their fashioning and worship of the golden calf in the wilderness (Ex. 32:7-14). David, the model king, poet, and musician, as a young man, faced off alone against the mammoth Philistine warrior, Goliath, who had terrified the armies of Israel for forty days, with no armor, only a sling and some stones as weapons, and a seemingly endless amount of bravado (as his own brother noted, 1 Sam. 17:28). Both appear to be more than a little crazy.

It is little wonder when hopes for deliverance from foreign occupation grew, certain communities of Jews focused on a coming savior figure, a messiah or anointed one, whose picture became something of a composite of these two men.

Both became to these communities agents as well as aspects³ of God's active self-revelation in history; both were interlinked with the central notions of their Jewish self-identity - being a particular nation of holy people, separated by God, but serving as a universal blessing for all nations. The law, the temple, the promised land, the priest, the prophet, the liberator, the king over a united nation were all symbolically lodged in their persons and then focused on this future deliverer.⁴

Jesus of Nazareth was just one of many messianic failures from this perspective; he did not liberate the Jewish people from Roman occupation and restore autonomy to the Jewish state, he did not purify the temple and rule as king. The Jewish historian, Josephus, gives us some portraits of other failures around the same time. But Jesus had had a profound effect on his followers, and an influential segment of them began to rework the notion of the messiah that would both match and reshape Jesus' story. Part of this revision and retrieval was to highlight the apparent foolishness and weakness of Jesus in the fashion of traditional characters like Moses and David.

In the first narrative portrayal of Jesus (the Gospel of Mark), his parables include visions of reversed expectations, such as the kingdom of God being not a cedar of Lebanon, but a large weed (a mustard plant) growing from a tiny seed, and it being like one who sells everything to own a very valuable pearl (which then cannot shelter, clothe, or feed the merchant, much less a family). The disciples are

delighted by their empowerment to heal and exorcise demons, but from the sixth chapter onward, they become increasingly confused by the meaning of Jesus' teachings and miracles. Jesus almost immediately antagonizes the current Jewish authorities and already by the third chapter, some of them begin plotting to kill him - a plot that haunts the rest of the story. Although Jesus' conflict with authority goes underground after the third chapter, it resumes in the seventh, and these stories form an essential context for the stunning revelation of a new messianic vision in the eighth. Jesus knows of the plot to kill him, but he internalizes it to his mission as his own self-sacrifice, the giving of his life to be "a ransom for many." The Jewish elders, priests, and scribes (yet not the Romans) will unite to murder him, but he shall be victorious and rise from the dead. Not only that, but the messianic community shall likewise be marked by persecution and suffering. So nothing is as it appears. Jesus seems a failed messiah, a fool, rejected by the community's leaders, and finally the people themselves, and executed by the Romans for treason. His followers seem to be nothing more than a marginal, suffering, and misled community. But behind these appearances is a risen lord and an empowered community, subsisting on the promises and spirit of a universal and victorious messiah.

In C. S. Lewis' alliterative options - Jesus as lord, liar, or lunatic - the last, as apparent lunacy, has always been part of the Christian church's perspective. It is

a persistent theme in Paul's Corinthian letters; God has chosen the foolish things of the world to work salvation, particularly the preaching of the cross, thus confounding the wise and subverting their wisdom. "The foolishness of God is wiser than human beings are, and the weakness of God is stronger than they." This will await Martin Luther's so-called "theology of the cross" to start becoming systematised in Christian theology, but it already lay in the background of Christian martyr and ascetic stories, as well as renewal and perfectionist movements. It is the secularist tendencies of modernity and, especially, of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, that pushes the notion of seeming foolishness as true wisdom to the forefront. The creative dissident or "genius" in any field will often appear initially as a clown. It becomes an important aspect, for example, in the movement of Existentialism through its "founders," the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard and the novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky (it permeates a text like *The Idiot*, for instance). And, of course, it enters cinema.

Background 2

Donnie Darko, by his own admission, is troubled, confused, and afraid. He is around 16 years old; he has been held back in school. He has burned down an abandoned house and spent time in jail for it. He is not allowed to drive until he is twenty-one. He has been sleepwalking and even sleep-bicycling. He is seeing a therapist and is on medication. In the course of the movie, he begins to hallucinate.

He makes friends with an “imaginary” six-foot male dressed in a rabbit costume named Frank, who directs him to flood his school and burn down a second house. He sees “spears” of liquid emanating from people’s chests indicating where they will go next. His therapist says such daylight hallucinations are “common among paranoid schizophrenics.” He becomes convinced the end of the world is fast approaching, that he can build a time machine, and that Frank (a figment of his imagination) soon is going to kill someone. He finally believes that he himself must die to save the world. And he does die... a marginal, rather eccentric teenager - no one particularly special.

So beside the messianic fantasy, what makes this a messianic movie? It can be seen as a “descent into madness” film but the screenplay is weighted rather strongly against it, especially when segments from the book Donnie reads to gain perspective in the film were included in the DVD release: *The Philosophy of Time Travel* by Roberta Sparrow.⁵ Written 44 years before the setting for the story (1944 and 1988 respectively), it reads like an apocalyptic religious revelation couched in scientific jargon. Her book becomes prophecy and she, a prophet. As such, she’s considered by the town as eccentric, at best, and more commonly, as demented.

Very rarely, the 1944 book reveals, but at least twice in history (recorded in Mayan myth and medieval romance), the fabric of time has become “corrupted” in the primary universe and this universe been displaced by a tangent one. Roberta

Sparrow is clearly worried it may happen again during her lifetime: “If I am alive when the events foretold in these pages occur, then I hope that you will find me before it is too late.” The situation is highly unstable, she continues; a tangent universe can hold together for only a few weeks before collapsing into a black hole, destroying the primary world forever. An event like this is heralded by the sudden appearance of a metal object from the future. It will travel within a vortex or wormhole made of water which connects the universes at their respective times - a three or four week interval between them will exist at the point of their connection. Thus water and metal are “the key elements in time travel.”

A Living Receiver is mysteriously designated in the tangent universe by some immanent or transcendent power to guide the metal artifact telekinetically into a water vortex for its voyage back in time. If the Receiver successfully accomplishes this, the world shall be saved and the primary universe restored back to the point when the tangent universe began, some weeks earlier. Two things will then occur. First, the few weeks in the alternative future, if “remembered” at all by those who “lived” in it, will be only at an unconscious level. Second, the Living Receiver in the primary world will die from the artifact upon its impact, although this one was earlier spared when the artifact hit just after the tangent time began. “Ancient myth tells us of the Mayan Warrior killed by an Arrowhead that had fallen from a cliff, where there was no Army, no enemy to be found. We are told of the

Medieval Knight mysteriously impaled by the sword he had not yet built. We are told that these things occur for a reason.”⁶

The only mental evidence of this “time corruption,” then, is in the dreams of the so-called survivors. The only physical evidence is the artifact which suddenly appears in the primary world from a tangent time some weeks later, and is necessarily inexplicable. So in less than a month, the Living Receiver must learn that these weeks are “borrowed time” and then be willing to sacrifice oneself anonymously for the world’s survival.

Those that live in proximity to the Living Receiver, the “Manipulated Living” as they are called, are filled with an unconscious urgency since the arrival of the artifact... a kind of “collective unconscious” if you will. “They are prone to irrational, bizarre, and often violent behaviour. This is the unfortunate result of their task, which is to assist the Living Receiver in returning the Artifact to the Primary Universe. The Manipulated Living will do anything to save themselves from Oblivion.” In the case of Donnie Darko, they act to direct both the Living Receiver and each other. And, as we now know, they are “manipulated” not only by their unconscious drive to survive and therefore to have the artifact returned, but by a necessary acquiescence to their savior’s sacrificial death.⁷ “When the Manipulated awaken from their Journey into the Tangent Universe, they are often haunted by the experience in their dreams... Those who do remember the Journey are often

overcome with profound remorse for the regretful actions buried within their Dreams..."

Finally there are the "Manipulated Dead." These are they who die in the tangent universe in close proximity to the Living Receiver. They are said to be more powerful than the Living Receiver and to be able to communicate with this one through a fourth dimensional construct made of water. One way these can appear is as "spears" of liquid emanating from the chest. In addition, the Manipulated Dead "will often set an Ensurance Trap for the Living Receiver to ensure that the Artifact is returned safely to the Primary Universe. If the Ensurance Trap is successful, the Living Receiver is left with no choice but to use his Fourth Dimensional Power to send the Artifact back..."

This then brings up the final aspect of the book, as we have access to it: the Living Receiver's abilities. Previously I quoted that water and metal are "the key elements in time travel." The Living Receiver will have to discover one's power over these elements, otherwise the Receiver cannot work with either a metal artifact or a water vortex in order ultimately to save the world.

Donnie Darko

Donnie Darko, as I stated above, has had "emotional problems" for years before midnight on October 2, 1988, when the primary universe is displaced. Given to

somnambulism but not to hallucinations, Donnie, in a deep sleep, is told by a disembodied, synthesized voice to wake up. He is directed to a nearby golf course where he encounters Frank in an eerie rabbit costume, who tells him “28 days, 6 hours, 42 minutes, 12 seconds. That is when the world will end.” In other words, on October 30 at 6:42 am. Donnie, now the Living Receiver, is awakened on the golf course in the morning sunlight by a neighbor and returns home to find the house surrounded by emergency vehicles and a jet engine being removed. He’s told by his younger sister, Samantha, that it fell in his room. His older sister, Elizabeth, says, “They don’t know where it came from.”

Frank is going to be carrying on a strange double existence in this new tangent universe. On the one hand, he is dating Donnie’s sister, Elizabeth, talking to her on the phone, designing and making an amazing rabbit costume for Halloween, driving his red Trans Am around town, going to parties. On the other hand, he is appearing to Donnie in strange visions, in the Halloween costume he has yet to make, telling him to flood his school, investigate time travel, and burn down Jim Cunningham’s house. He is, in this latter manifestation, the Manipulated Dead Frank. The day following the engine crash, when Donnie returns to school, he is now surrounded by the Manipulated Living, with one exception. There is a second Manipulated Dead, but more on that later.

It is instructive to follow through the narrative to see how the many actions and directives of the Manipulated world enlighten Donnie directly and prepare him for self-sacrifice as well as how they work on each other. But this is beyond the confines of this essay.⁸ We need here to learn what the major emotional impediment is going to be that might prevent Donnie from fulfilling his role as Living Receiver and how this is overcome.

Jim Cunningham, a local entrepreneur, has developed a self-help course entitled “Controlling Fear.” Kittie Farmer, a gym teacher at Donnie’s high school has adopted it into the health education curriculum. It divides all human behavior and emotions into mutually exclusive “positive” and “negative” energy spectra, with the labels of Love and Fear. The exercise given to Donnie is a hypothetical case where a wallet is found and returned by Ling Ling, but she pockets the money. Donnie is to place the action on a “Life Line” as being the product of either love or fear. He balks at the exercise: “Life isn’t that simple,” he says. “I mean who cares if Ling Ling returns the wallet and keeps the money? It has nothing to do with either fear or love.” In exasperation, when Ms. Farmer tells him he must cooperate otherwise he will receive a zero for the day, Donnie tells her that she can “forceably insert the Life Line exercise into [her] anus,” as she later reports it. Rose, his mother, wishes to apologize to Kittie for her son’s behavior but is quickly silenced

by Kittie's retort: "Our paths through life must be righteous. I urge you to go home and look in the mirror, and pray that your son doesn't succumb to the path of fear."

The importance of this scene is underscored by one that soon follows it, when Donnie talks to his therapist, Dr. Lilian Thurman. Roberta Sparrow has recently been stepping out of her secluded house and checking for mail, after a prolonged period of total reclusion. She is 101, and is named by the kids "Grandma Death." Eddie, Donnie's father, shortly after the jet engine's crash, nearly runs her over as he's driving Donnie home from school, and Donnie steps out of the car to see if he can be of assistance to her.⁹ She whispers to him, "Every living creature on earth dies alone." Donnie now tells this to Dr. Thurman, saying that it reminds him of when his dog Callie crawled under the house. "To die?" Dr. Thurman asks; "To be alone," Donnie answers. To the question whether he feels alone right now, Donnie says he would like to believe he isn't, but he's never seen any proof otherwise, so he considers it absurd to debate it. She asks: "The search for God is absurd?" "It is if everyone dies alone," Donnie answers. "Does that scare you?" "I don't wanna be alone."

The Life Line is simplistic, as Donnie notes, but it does pose his own [biblical] predicament: Where is the perfect love that can cast out his fear (1 John 4:18)?¹⁰ Donnie seems to come to terms with it from four quarters. He has two friends, Sean and Ronald, who are always there for him: Love as committed

friendship. More importantly, a central object of Donnie's rage has been his mother. He calls her a bitch and demands she leave his room, early in the movie, but she does not escalate the tension, then or at any other time. Instead she supports him wishing only that he "experience some relief." In his last encounter with her, they sit on his bed together. "How's it feel to have a wacko for a son?" he asks. "It feels wonderful," she replies, as she reaches over and touches his cheek.¹¹ He learns love from her as longsuffering, care, and reconciliation.

Cherita Chen is the perennial outcast of his class. She sits alone during breaks by the statue of the school mascot. She eats in seclusion near the sports field. She is ridiculed and told to go back to China. She lingers by herself in the halls, listening to Donnie talk to the teachers, for she secretly loves him. Donnie, for his part, pays little attention to her, but he does tell his friends to stop taunting her. Donnie's final, and in a sense, first real encounter with her is in a deserted hallway after school, as she has been eavesdropping on him. He approaches her, lifts her ear muffs and says, "I promise that one day everything's going to be better for you." She runs and Donnie wears her abandoned ear muffs as he walks off. He learns love as sympathy and compassion through her marginalization.

And then there is Gretchen Ross, a new girl at school. She has relocated with her mother and changed her name to escape her stepfather after he stabbed her mother four times in the chest. He is still at large. She becomes Donnie's girlfriend

and initially he mainly lusts after her. But after dating for two weeks, they walk together in the woods. Gretchen wonders “[W]hat if you could go back in time and take all those hours of pain and darkness and replace them with something better... Just things that remind you of how beautiful the world [can be].” Donnie wants to kiss her, but she pulls back. “I just want it to be... at a time when...” “When it reminds you how beautiful the world can be?” Donnie queries. “Yeah...” He is learning the dynamics of romantic love rather than lust. When she finally does kiss him later (for she initiates it) it is not at such a moment, but she does it to alleviate the sting of shame after a bully confronts her in class about her stepfather’s crime. It is not to remind her of the world’s beauty, but to try and create it. So too when they have sexual intercourse the night before the end of the world. Gretchen shows up at the house in a fright. When she returned home earlier, her mother was gone, the house a mess, and there was no note. “I’m just so scared. I keep thinking something awful is happening, and... it’s my fucking stepdad I know it. I guess some people are just born with tragedy in their blood.” Moved by the passion of the moment, they find solace and meaning in sexual intimacy. This love expresses mutual, intimate care in a tragic world.

Shortly thereafter, things come together for Donnie. He sees a note from Elizabeth’s Frank and he appears to put the two Franks together. He then encounters a watery time spear from Gretchen (she is the other Manipulated Dead, but without

a double existence) and he learns where he must be to find and help Frank: near Grandma Death's cellar door. Plus Donnie wants to deliver a letter to Roberta Sparrow anyway. Gretchen and Donnie are attacked there and Gretchen is thrown semiconscious in the yard. Elizabeth's Frank, meanwhile, returning from a beer run, speeds along the deserted road by the house and swerves to avoid Roberta Sparrow, who is standing in the street having found the letter, and runs over Gretchen, killing her.¹² Donnie carries her home with him, and then takes the family car to the Carpathian Ridge some miles away with her dead body sitting next to him. He is not alone as he chooses to sacrifice himself and he remembers her words about going back in time and replacing the pain and darkness with something better. He watches the sky as an airplane nears, on which his mother and Samantha happen to be returning from a short trip to California. He has learned his telekinetic powers over metal and water, so he pulls the engine from the plane and sends it into a vortex, where it will land, on October 2, in his room, as he awaits his death. Thereby he saves his mother, sister, Gretchen, and indeed, the whole world.

Conclusion

Donnie Darko is a most ambitious cinematic retelling of the Jesus myth from the vantage point of apparent madness. Outside the action/adventure genre, the messianic story is almost always localized: the Christ figure and one's sacrifice irreversibly alter the lives of those who remember and follow this one. They alone

have come to understand that behind the strange behavior and ideas of the hero was a real redemptive purpose; others, however, will continue to see the character as a misfit, at best. But this film shifts these limits significantly. For one thing, the salvation here is global, in fact more inclusive than the original Jesus narratives, for the whole world is to be destroyed and Donnie saves it entirely, things animate and inanimate. This is rare for a character-driven deliverance story, but common enough in action-driven ones. The greatest deviation is at the point of legacy, of “resurrection.” Donnie Darko saved the world by his act of self-sacrifice, but no one there will ever know it, nor will anyone’s life be altered because of his altruistic example. He’ll remain to everyone a mentally troubled young man, who died an untimely death under mysterious circumstances. There is something very striking, unsettling, and yet also welcome about the anonymity of it all. It certainly changes the meaning of the “messianic secret” typical of studies of the Christian Gospel of Mark. In an age as obsessed with fame as this is, perhaps we need to see more of this kind of savior in our stories.

¹ Valmiki’s very famous rendition is available on the internet in a nineteenth-century translation by Ralph Griffith at the sacred texts site: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rama/index.htm>

² <http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/sitasingstheblues/>

³ <http://www.wired.com/entertainment/hollywood/news/2008/04/sita?currentPage=all>; <http://www.sitasingstheblues.com/faq.html>

⁴ Technically they are known as Vanaras and are special creations of the gods.

⁵ The story is that she was found as a baby in a furough by the king, Janaka, who then adopted her as his daughter. The ending of the narrative by Sita returning to the earth has more symmetry overall than Valmiki's happy ending after the trial by fire and so the myth is usually told with both ordeals.

⁶ This is brought to the forefront in Deepa Mehta's movie masterpiece, *Fire*, released in 1996. Equally problematic is the famous story of Sati, who publicly incinerates herself to protest the way her father has treated her husband, Shiva. The story may be found in the *Bhagavata Purana* 4.3-4; see <http://srimadbhagavatam.com/>

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⁸ This is, of course, a reference to the Christological position known as "Docetism" from the Greek word "to seem."

⁹ Ms. Sparrow must step into the street to check her mailbox, and she lives at a treacherous turn in the road.

¹⁰ I am arguing that Donnie's greatest fear, and therefore the likeliest point for him to refuse his "mission," is dying alone. What is the point of addressing this fear if he can survive in the primary universe along with everyone else? The Manipulated Living and Dead would not be setting up contexts of love to overcome his fear, but ones appealing to simple enlightened self-interest.

¹¹ The Director's Cut emphasizes this reconciliation even more forcefully.

¹² This is the centerpiece of the so-called "Ensurance Trap" noted in paragraph 15, because Donnie then shoots Frank, killing him. It will only be a matter of hours before the police are in pursuit of him for murder.