

ICONS OF JESUS CHRIST IN *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

Professor Tolkien once said about *The Lord of the Rings* that he had written a book about God but without mentioning him. I long took this assertion for granted because I could intuitively feel the spiritual background of the book. But when I first told my 12 year old son about this J.R.R. Tolkien's intention, he immediately challenged me. According to him there was nothing religious in the book but only adventures and suspense. This assertion led to numerous discussions between us and it rapidly became clear that a whole book would be necessary to deal with such a vast subject. But in this article I will try to show that some of the main characters of *The Lord of the Rings* are indeed icons of Jesus Christ.

The word icon comes from a Greek word which meant "who looks like". In the Catholic tradition three different facets of the personality of Jesus are commonly accepted and worshipped. First, there is Jesus at work preaching in the world to preach the coming of his kingdom, during his public life at the beginning, and through his Church since the Ascension. Secondly there is Jesus suffering his Passion to redeem the world. Lastly, we have Christ as the king of the universe reigning in heaven. I shall try to demonstrate that we can find an "icon" of each of those facets in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Gandalf the Grey is the first candidate we will study. He dies fighting and overcoming the fallen maïa (angel) embodied in the balrog in the abyss under Durin's Bridge "far under living earth, where time is not counted" (LOTR, page 490). It is easy to make a parallel with the Christian credo "*mortuus [.] descendit ad inferos*". The "Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church" (Idem

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631 and following) teaches us that during this descent to the Hebrew's Sheol Jesus defeated the angel of death, vassal of the Devil, and broke free the door of Hell for the souls of the righteous who were waiting for his salvation.

The credo then continue with; "*tertia die resurrexit a mortuis*". Gandalf too experienced death and resurrection in this way. The text in the "White Rider" (LOTR page 491) is a little vague about the exact nature of this death and resurrection and some could argue that it was only a sort of coma. But appendix B of *The Tale of Years* (LOTR page 1067) is perfectly clear:

"- 25 He cast down the Balrog, and passes away[.]

- 14 [.] Gandalf returns to life, and lies in trance"

This experience of death, struggle with a dark angel and resurrection is enough to designate Gandalf as a strong Christ-like figure. But even if this passage through death and resurrection is central in Gandalf's character, it is not enough to make of him the image of a redeeming Christ. His death happens nearly by surprise without the long announcement that we have in the gospel. More precisely Jesus Christ during his trial and passion never challenges his judges or his tormentors. On the contrary his passiveness surprises them. Gandalf in Moria on the other hand fights back and retaliates against the Balrog. He is, more generally, noticeably active during the whole of *Lord of the Rings*, travelling all over Middle Earth and combining the forces of the enemies of Darkness. He very often himself insists on calling this

the "time of his labour". Even when his endeavour is finished he says just before he leaves the Hobbits and goes to talk with Tom Bombadil "He is a moss-gatherer, and I have been a stone doomed to rolling. But my rolling days are ending" (LOTR page 974). This sentence describing a man always on the road can be compared with Matthew 8, 20 "foxes have their holes and birds their nests, but the Son of Man hath nowhere to lay his head". For that reason I think that we can identify Gandalf with Jesus Christ labouring in the world.

But there is more to say on that subject. Tolkien was a devout Christian and according to the tenets of Christian faith, the Lord is still at work in our world. This belief comes from the last sentence of the Gospel according to Matthew. "I will be with you always, to the end of time" Matthew 28,20. For a catholic, as JRR Tolkien was, things are even more precise, Jesus intervenes mainly, though not exclusively, through the Holy Church and the head of this Church is the pope. For a catholic the pope is not "god on earth" as it is sometimes written, this would be on the edge of blasphemy, but it is true that he has a special position. He can be considered as the true "authorised representative" of Jesus Christ. This belief is founded on several verses of the Gospel, especially on two of them.

In Mark 12,10 Jesus says speaking of himself "the stone which the builders rejected has become the main corner stone. This is the Lord's doing". Afterward he said to Peter in Matthew 16,18 "and I say to thee, thou art Peter, the stone, ["rock" in the authorized Version] and on this Rock I will build my Church". The Catholics believe that by naming Peter "the [corner] stone" he delegates his dignity and power to the first pope

and through him to his successors. This interpretation is reinforced by the following verse "I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, what you forbid on earth shall be forbidden in Heaven, and what you allow on earth shall be allowed in Heaven" (Matthew 16,19.)

In the same way, in John 10,11 and 10, 14, Jesus says "I am the good shepherd". Later, after his resurrection he says three times to Peter "feed my lambs" (John 21, 15-17). Again, Catholics believe that by transferring his role of shepherd to Peter, Jesus invests him with his very power and dignity.

With reference to those passages of the Gospel, the Catholics consider the pope as the Vicar of Jesus Christ. It is interesting to consider that the pope is the only person in the Roman Catholic Church who is strictly clad in white. A man so fond of tradition and liturgy as Tolkien was no doubt aware of this. Therefore it cannot be a simple coincidence if Gandalf after his resurrection becomes "the white" and is clad in immaculate clothing.

It is also striking to see that John Paul II has been nicknamed by the media "the white pilgrim" in reference to all his travelling around the world. I am well aware that when Tolkien wrote the *Lord of the Rings* the council of Vatican II had not yet occurred and that at that time the pope was still voluntarily locked up in the Vatican. But C S Lewis once said about the *Lord of the Rings*: "these things were not devised to reflect any particular situation in the real world. It was the other way round; real events began, horribly, to conform to the pattern he had freely invented". By saying this he was referring to the Nazi concentration camps or the Soviet gulags that were unknown to Tolkien when he began his book, but proved so similar to his creation Mordor. But if this sentence can be applied to horror it can also be used for success and hope. Everybody agrees that the pope played a major part in the unexpected and pacific fall of communism, exactly in the way that Gandalf played a major part in the collapse of Barad-dûr.

For all those reasons I think that

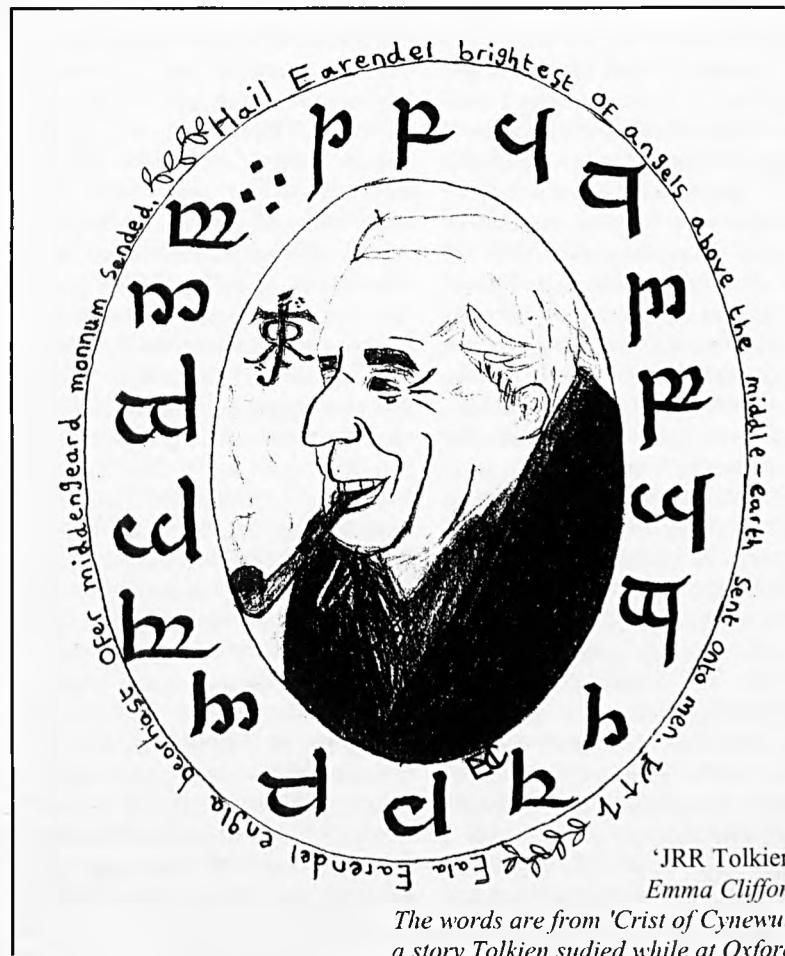
we can say that Gandalf-Mithrandir is at the same time an icon of Jesus Christ at work in the world and at the head of the Church.

The icon of Jesus Christ suffering his Passion has to be found in another character of *The Lord of the Rings* and I think that that person is Frodo. All through the book the "Ring bearer" is like the Cross bearer. The first similarity begins during the council of Elrond. Tolkien writes - "a great dread fell on him, as if he was awaiting the pronouncement of some doom that he had long foreseen and vainly hoped might after all never be spoken" (LOTR page 263). This dread in the face of of a terrifying fate and its free acceptance, can be compared to the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane "Father, if it be thy will, take this cup from me. Yet not my will but thine be done" (Luke 22, 42).

Later, during the breaking of the fellowship in his dialogue with Sam, Frodo tries to explain to Sam that he

will die if he follows him in Mordor. Then Sam answers, "I know that well enough, Mr Frodo [...] and I am coming with you." From my point of view, this decision taken by Sam is not the manifestation of an homosexual love which dare not speak its name, as was speculated in Mallorn 38 [*"Queer Lodgings"* by David Craig]. For me, it is plainly the love of a worshipper for his God, ready to suffer martyrdom. We have one example in the Gospel when Jesus decides to return to Jerusalem where everybody knows that he is under threat of death. "Let us also go and die with him" (John 11-16) is the response of Thomas.

Later Frodo is stripped of his clothes, whipped and mocked in the tower of Cirith Ungol in the same way that Jesus Christ is in the palace of Pilate before his crucifixion. Later the description of his suffering under the burden of the One Ring while climbing the Orodruin, strikingly reminds one of Jesus carrying his cross when climbing the Golgotha.



'JRR Tolkien'
Emma Clifford
The words are from 'Crist of Cynewul'
a story Tolkien studied while at Oxford.

Mallorn XXXVIII

“Among all their pains [Frodo] bore the worst, the growing weight of the Ring, a burden on the body and a torment to his mind” (LOR page 914) and also - “I can’t manage it, Sam. It is such a weight to carry, such a weight” (LOTR page 916). He then stumbles and falls and is unable to fulfil his task without the help of Sam. Exactly as Jesus cannot manage to carry his cross to the end and needs the help of Simon from Cyrene (Matthew 27, 32).

Frodo also undergoes an experience of death and resurrection when he is stung by Shelob. The appearance of death is so authentic that even Sam, the person who knows Frodo best, is convinced by it. “No stir of life could he find, nor feel the faintest flutter of the heart. Often he chafed his master’s hands and feet, and touch his brow, but all were cold - ‘he is dead’” he said (LOR page 713). This apparently cold, inglorious and hopeless death followed by a “resurrection” and the salvation of the world is the most convincing piece of evidence that Frodo is an icon of the suffering Christ.

To reinforce this identification, Tolkien takes care to point out precisely the date of the destruction of the Ring by Frodo through Gandalf’s voice on the field of the Cormallen. “In Gondor the new year will always now begin upon the twenty-fifth of March when Sauron fell” (LOTR page 931). This very date is, according to the tradition (though not a dogma), the date of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the day of the first new Easter.

Lastly we may observe that the acclamation which greets Frodo, soon after, on the field of the Cormallen is very similar in style to several psalms, and especially psalms 148 and 150. But those psalms are prayers to praise the glory of the Lord, not to underline his sufferings. In fact on the Cormallen field Frodo is associated with Aragorn; and Aragorn is the icon of the Christ King of the universe.

In contrast to the two previous characters, Aragorn does not undergo an experience of death and resurrection. This is not surprising, Jesus as the King of the universe has already overcome his enemies and is now untouchable by any kind of evil.

So is Aragorn. In the whole book he does not suffer from any taint of the evil forces. On the physical level he never knows even a simple scratch but more strikingly he is also untouchable on the spiritual level. He never lusts for the One Ring, whereas even Galadriel and Gandalf *are* tempted. He is able to take the Paths of the Dead without feeling any fear. He is, also able to look in the palantir and defeat Sauron in this duel of will though even Saruman and Denethor have been trapped.

This incorruptibility even extends to his body which does not rot away but, on the contrary, lies for a long time in great beauty (Appendix A, the tale of Aragorn and Arwen). We should remember that in the Roman Catholic Church the incorruptibility of the body has always been, and is still, considered as a proof of sainthood. There is, therefore, no doubt that Tolkien made of Aragorn a saint. But in fact he did more than that; Aragorn is not only a saint, he is an image of *the* saint.

It is commonly accepted by most Christian theologians that death is a consequence of the fall of Adam and Eve. As a consequence of this, many of them believe that without this original sin, Men would not have known death but would have passed peacefully and by his free will from this world to heaven. That is the reason why Catholics believe in the dogma of the Assumption, and the orthodox in the idea of the Dormition. To explain the differences between those two dogmas is beyond the scope of this paper and is anyway not unnecessary. It is enough to say that both of them concern the Virgin Mary because she was preserved from any kind of sin, including the original one.

The description of Aragorn’s death in Appendix A is very close to the theory of Dormition as mentioned above. For a writer as aware of Christian theology as Tolkien was, this cannot be by chance. This means that Tolkien accepted the idea that Aragorn also had been preserved from any kind of sin. And the only man in the whole universe to have this privilege in the Christian faith, is Jesus Christ himself.

Not surprisingly, on several

occasions Aragorn gives a glimpse of the majesty of the Lord. When he first meets Eomer he is subjected to a kind of transfiguration which reminds us of Jesus Christ as described in Matthew 17,2 or Mark 9,2. “Gimli and Legolas looked at their companion in amazement ... He seemed to have grown in stature while Eomer had shrunk, and in his living face they caught a brief glimpse of the power and majesty of the kings of stone. For a moment it seemed to the eyes of Legolas that a white flame flickered on the brows of Aragorn.” (LOTR, page 423).

Another time, during the ride after having taken the Paths of the Dead with the host of wraiths following him, Legolas wonders, “even the shades of Men are obedient to his will” (LOTR page 857). This can be compared with the reflections of the disciples who ask themselves in surprise “What is this? - he speaks with authority. When he gives orders, even the unclean spirits obey.” (Mark 1-27).

Aragorn also has the ability to cure wounds merely by his touch, as is shown when he cures Faramir, Merry and Eowin. In the Gospel too Jesus makes numerous healings by laying his hands on invalids. This is especially the case when he granted the prayer of Jairus to save his daughter “I beg thee to come and lay thy hands on her so that her life may be saved.” (Mark 5-23).

I think that, at this juncture, it is clear that the three main characters of *The Lord of the Rings* are directly inspired by the figure of Jesus Christ. One might wonder therefore why the book is frequently considered a pagan one, even among Christians.

REFERENCES

All quotation are from the one volume edition of LOTR published by Harper Collins.