

Tom Bombadil's Biblical Connections

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In the month of September in the year 1954 Tolkien answered a letter he had received from Peter Hastings.¹ The latter had asked some questions because – in his opinion – Tolkien might have ‘over-stepped the mark in metaphysical matters’. One of his points was that Tolkien implied that Tom Bombadil is God. He was brought to this conclusion because of Frodo’s question ‘Who is Tom Bombadil?’, to which Goldberry replies ‘He is’. Hastings here discerns an allusion to the biblical book of Exodus, chapter 3, verse 14. In the story told in that chapter God reveals himself to Moses, to whom he gives the assignment to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt. Moses, not being too pleased with this task, tries to hold it off. God, however, is relentless, so Moses has to accept his mission. He subsequently asks what might be God’s name. God answers: ‘I am that I am’,² and – so the verse continues – ‘This is what you are to say to the Israelites: “I am has sent me to you”’ (New International Version).

To begin with I would like to consider this allusion from *The Lord of the Rings* to Exodus 3:14. In a subsequent section, by fo-

cusssing on the New Testament, I will illustrate that Peter Hastings’ remark is not the only possible connection between Tom and the Bible.

TOM BOMBADIL AND EXODUS

It is hardly possible for anyone who is acquainted with the Bible to fail to notice what Hastings is hinting at. It *really* is remarkable for Goldberry to refer to Tom by means of the verb ‘to be’ without adding a predicate; because in the biblical text God uses the same construction. Moreover, it is quite exceptional to use the verb ‘to be’ this way. Whenever one refers to one’s name or one’s nature ‘to be’ functions as a copula (like ‘He is Tom Bombadil’, or ‘He is a Vala’). Hastings’ idea of a possible connexion between both characters is by all means warranted.

However, in his reply Tolkien writes ‘As for Tom Bombadil, I really do think you are being too serious, besides missing the point. (Again the words are used by Goldberry and Tom not by me as a commentator) ... But Tom and Goldberry are referring to the mystery of *names*. Read and ponder Tom’s words in *LotR* Vol. 1³ ... Frodo has asked not “what is Tom Bombadil” but “Who is he”.

We and he no doubt often laxly confuse the questions. Goldberry gives what I think is the correct answer. We need not go into the sublimities of ‘I am that am’ – which is quite different from *he is*’ (*Letters*, 191-192)¹.

This fragment illustrates Tolkien’s rejection of any relationship whatsoever between Tom Bombadil and God. Nevertheless it is interesting to look whether on the basis of ‘He is’ we could find some intertextual relations between Tom Bombadil and several biblical texts. In the next sections I will discuss several biblical texts and relate those to the Tom Bombadil episode in *The Lord of the Rings*. Yet, before doing so, I have to make another remark concerning the text of Exodus 3:14.

Although Tolkien in his letter writes that Goldberry is focussing on the *mystery of names* (‘who is’), and not on Tom’s nature (‘what is’), and by means of this suggests that one cannot link Goldberry’s statement to God’s, the Exodus-text appears to be concerned with the very same question. Moses asks for God’s name, not for his nature. Not until after the verse in which God reveals his name (Exodus 3:14) does he make a statement on his

1. *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (ed. by H. Carpenter), London: George Allen & Unwin 1981, no. 153, 187.

2. ‘I am who I am’, or ‘I am that I am’ is an English rendering of the Hebrew *ehyè asher ehyè*; *ehyè* is a verbal form of the verb *hayah*, ‘to be’, and might as well be translated ‘I am that I will be’, or ‘I will be that I am’; the clause can be translated in various ways. The authors of Exodus thought the Hebrew name of God, YHWH , to be derived from the verb *hayah*, ‘to be’. So, ‘I am who I am’ is a non-scientific explanation for the Hebrew name of God. One writes YHWH since in Hebrew only the consonants are written. No one knows how God’s name ought to be pronounced. The most commonly known pronunciations are Jehova (which is completely wrong) and Yahweh (which *might* be correct).

3. ‘Don’t you know my name yet? That’s the only answer. Tell me, who are you, alone, yourself and nameless?’ *LotR*, p 146; I refer to the ‘de luxe edition’ of *LotR*, published by Unwin and Hyman, London 1990).

Mallorn XXXVII

divine nature: ‘God also said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, The Lord (YHWH), the God of your fathers – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob – has sent me to you. This (YHWH) is my name for ever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation”’ (New International Version). So, not until here does God say that he is a member of the species, the class of ‘gods’. The name, however, is closely connected with God’s being.

TOM BOMBADIL AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

In this section I will focus upon four elements in which we find Tom involved with the New Testament in one way or another.

1. *I am*

The authors of the New Testament depict Jesus as the son of God. One of these authors is the writer of the Gospel according to John. This author makes Jesus frequently use the designation ‘I am’, when the latter is engaged in conversation with his fellow Jewish discussion partners. In most cases ‘I am’ is followed by a predicate, e.g. ‘I am the bread of life’ (6:37), ‘I am the good shepherd’ (10:11), ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life’ (14:6). Apart from ‘I am-’ texts like these, ‘I am’ is encountered several times *without* a predicate. Whilst speaking to Jesus a Samaritan woman says: ‘I know that the messiah is coming’ (4:25), to which Jesus reacts ‘I am’ (4:26). In another episode, when he is arguing with his countrymen, Jesus says: ‘Very truly, I

tell you, before Abraham was, I am’ (8:58). And towards the end of the gospel several servants of the law come to arrest Jesus:

So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, ‘Whom are you looking for?’ They answered, ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’ Jesus replied, ‘I am’. Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. When Jesus said to them, ‘I am’, they stepped back and fell to the ground.

I am mainly interested in these three last mentioned cases. Here Jesus uses ‘I am’ in the same syntactic (though not semantic) way as does Goldberry when she answers Frodo with ‘He is’. Apart from this similarity between Jesus and Tom Bombadil, there are another two things that may establish a relationship between the man and the character. Firstly, from Jesus’ words ‘before Abraham was, I am’ we can infer that Jesus claims to have existed before Abraham was born. According to biblical chronology this might have been more than 1800 years before Jesus made his statement.⁴ The author of the gospel has Jesus express his pre-existence. The author claims that Jesus existed before the world came into being, as can be seen in the prologue to his gospel: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the

Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.

All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it’ (John 1:1-5). In other words, since Jesus existed before the creation of the world, he is the oldest living being on earth. So, this bears quite a resemblance to Tom’s words³ that he is the oldest creature in Middle-earth (‘Eldest, that’s what I am’,) – and besides, there are some substantial arguments to ascribe Tom’s existence prior to the creation of Arda.⁵

A second similarity can be discerned when Jesus is arrested. As soon as he says ‘I am’, his adversaries recoil. His words overcome his enemies (just as in the gospels according to Mark, Matthew and Luke, when he silences the storm on the lake, or exorcizes evil spirits). In Tom’s case we also find that his words have authority over hostile powers: ‘You let them out again, Old Man Willow’, he said. ‘What be you a-thinking of? You should not be waking. Eat earth. Dig deep. Drink water! Bombadil is talking!’⁶ And also we find him at the Barrow-downs⁷ expelling the Barrow-wight by using nothing but his words: ‘Tom stooped, removed his hat, and came into the dark chamber, singing:

*Get out you old
Wight! Vanish in the sunlight!
Shrivel like the
cold mist,*

4. I here refer to the literary world of the Bible. Whether the Abraham of the Bible ever really lived does not matter here, although it is highly questionable.

5. Cf. my contribution in the annual of the Dutch Tolkienengenoetschap Unquendor “Who are you, Master? On the Nature and Identity of Tom Bombadil” (*Lembas Extra 1996*, 25-47).

6,7. *LotR 1990*, p135, pp 157-8. The spelling in the text differs from that on the map of Middle-earth, where it is ‘Barrow Downs’.

like the winds
go wailing,

Out into the
barren lands far beyond the
mountains!

Come never
here again! Leave your bar-
row empty!

Lost and forgot-
ten be, darker than the dark-
ness,

Where gates
stand for ever shut, till the
world is mended.

At these words there was a cry and part of the inner end of the chamber fell in with a crash.'

Whereas, according to Peter Hastings Goldberry's words to Frodo appeared to suggest that Tom was God, now – after considering a few parts of the Gospel according to John – we can also discern several relationships between Tom Bombadil and Jesus. Yet I will draw attention to some more connections between Tom and the biblical son of God.

2. Who are you?

In the New Testament book 'The Acts of the Apostles' Tom and Jesus seem to be related as well. In this book the author presents the narration of Jesus' initial followers, and how they proclaim the word of Jesus and spread the gospel during the second half of the first century AD all over the Roman Empire. The author also emphasizes the difficulties and resistance these people had to face. One of the worst opponents of the early Christians was Saul of Tarsis, who prosecuted them with great zeal. One day Saul is on his way from Jerusalem to

Damascus to arrest people who adhere to Jesus' teaching.

'Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.' The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank (Acts 9:3-9).'⁸

Of course, there are obvious differences between this episode and episodes from *The Lord of the Rings*, yet we can detect a number of similarities. Most remarkable is Saul's exclamation 'Who are you, Lord?', to which Frodo's question to Tom 'Who are you, Master?'³ is an obvious allusion.⁹ Seen from a wider perspective one might say that both Saul and Frodo are heading for an important place in their respective worlds, Damascus and Rivendell – no matter how different the reasons why they go there. If then we take the events described in 'A knife in the dark' into consideration it is clear that something happens to Frodo that cannot be seen by his friends, viz.

his being wounded by the lord of the Nazgûl. Something analogous happens to Saul. What befell him is invisible to his fellow travellers ('they heard the voice but saw no one'). Finally, both Saul and Frodo are unable to reach their destiny on their own – they need the aid of others to get there.

3. The dead and the living

According to Christian tradition Jesus by his crucifixion, death and rising from the dead has conquered death: death is not final. This is, among other things, illustrated by the stories at the ends of the gospels that are set in the vicinity of Jesus' grave (which was not a grave in the ground, as we are used to nowadays, it was a grave in a wall of rock, that was closed by placing a large stone in front of its entrance). The story I would like to draw attention to is in the Gospel according to Mark (16:1-8). When early in the morning of the third day after Jesus' crucifixion and death, some female disciples – being quite troubled about who is going to help them to remove the stone before the entrance – are on their way to the grave to embalm Jesus' body, they discover the stone already gone, and the tomb empty. Yet, they meet a young man, clothed in white¹⁰, who tells them that Jesus is no longer there.

In this narration from the Gospel according to Mark we also come across several connections with an episode from *LotR* in which Tom Bombadil is involved. After the hobbits have taken their leave of Goldberry and Tom on the third (!) day of their acquaintance, they arrive at the Barrow-

8. Saul (Paul) twice relates this event in his own words (Acts 22:6-11 and 26:13-16).

9. In Greek Saul's question is 'tis ei, kurie;'. The word 'Master' is a good English equivalent of the Greek word *kurios*, which in translations of the New Testament is mostly translated by 'lord'.

10. According to the author of the Gospel according to Matthew, there is an angel in white; in the Gospel according to Luke (the same author who wrote the Acts of the Apostles), there are two young people, and in the Gospel according to John we read that Jesus' linen wrappings are the only things left in the grave.

downs, where they are overcome with fatigue and fall asleep. Frodo awakes inside a barrow, and discovers that it is ruled by death. Pippin, Merry and Sam 'were on their back, and their faces looked deathly pale; and they were clad in white'.¹¹ An arm is approaching to terminate their lives. Luckily Frodo remembers the song Tom taught them: if they might be in trouble, they only had to sing it and Tom would be there to help them. As soon as Frodo has finished the song Tom is on the spot already: 'There was a loud rumbling sound, as of stones rolling and falling, and suddenly light streamed in, real light, the plain light of day.' He saves them from death's door.

It is clear that there is no one-to-one relation between the story of Mark 16 and the episode on the Barrow-downs. Nevertheless the features that both stories have in common cannot be neglected:

1) three days; 2) a grave/barrow; 3) the rolling away of the stone before the grave/Tom's rolling away the stones; 4) the events told occur early in the morning¹²; 5) both the young man and the hobbits are clad in white; and 6) it is a tale about salvation from death.

Especially this latter element is of importance: in Christianity it is Jesus who saves people from death; in the first part of *LotR* Tom Bombadil appears to be the saviour.

4. Prior versions

A further interesting issue to mention here with regard to the adventures of the hobbits when they find themselves near Tom Bombadil on the one hand, and the New Testament on the other is the following. Since Christopher Tolkien's publication of Tolkien's writings on Middle-earth the readers of Tolkien's fiction get an idea of the way in which Tolkien composed his stories.¹³ The initial drafts of the account of the hobbits' stay with Tom Bombadil and the Barrow-downs episode are to be found in *The Return of the Shadow*. When the hobbits have broken their fasts together with Tom, he accompanies them to the East Road, so that they will safely reach Bree by nightfall. Tom's advice is to stay at 'The Prancing Pony', where 'Barliman Butterbur is the worthy keeper'.¹⁴ In an earlier version Tom's words run like this: 'Barnabas Butterbur is the worthy keeper: he knows Tom Bombadil, and Tom's name will help you'.¹⁵ This Barnabas Butterbur did have another name in a still earlier version: Timothy Titus.¹⁶ Both Barnabas Butterbur and Timothy Titus were, by the way, hobbits. The remarkable thing when we have a look at the relationships between Tom Bombadil and the Bible is the name, or rather the names, of Barliman Butterbur's predecessors.

Above I tried to show that it is possible to find various connec-

tions between episodes in which we meet Tom Bombadil and several texts from the New Testament. The resemblances were in most cases rather implicit. Now, when coming across the names Barnabas Butterbur and Timothy Titus, their relation to the New Testament become quite explicit. Not only do we encounter a letter to Titus, and two letters to Timothy in the New Testament, we also meet both Barnabas and Timothy in the already mentioned book 'The Acts of the Apostles'. Barnabas is a prominent character who is a fellow traveller of Paul (the name of Saul after the incident near Damascus); Timothy is one of Paul's important assistants. Moreover, both are frequently mentioned in New Testament letters.

CONCLUSION

It is striking – and it can hardly be coincidental – that as soon as Tom Bombadil enters, we find various implicit and explicit connections with events from the New Testament. There may be more intertextual relationships than Tolkien was aware of or wished to acknowledge. However, questioning the intentions of an author is venturing onto thin ice – for with regard to intent there is more at work than a writer's conscience. Therefore I will not tackle the issue of Tolkien's awareness of the above indicated similarities between his novel and the Bible.¹⁷

11, 14. *LotR*, 1991 edition. p156, p 163.

12. 'It was still fairly early by the sun, something between nine and ten...' (*LotR*, 1991 edition, p 160).

13. As for *The Lord of the Rings*, there are four volumes from the 'The History of Middle-earth' to be considered, viz. *The Return of the Shadow*, *The Treason of Isengard*, *The War of the Ring* and *Sauron Defeated*.

15,16. *The Return of the Shadow*. p 329, also cf. p 130; p 140, note 3

17. Relations between Tolkien's fiction and the Bible are among others mentioned by Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth*, London: George Allen & Unwin 1982, Richard Purtill, *J.R.R. Tolkien. Myth, Morality and Religion*, San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers 1984, and Randel Helms, *Tolkien and the Silmarils*, London: Thames and Hudson 1981. In "The Elder Days: The Primeval History and *The Silmarillion*" (*Lembas Extra 1998: Proceedings of Unquendor's Third Lustrum Conference held in Delft, 25 May 1996*, 56-72) I showed that the composition of *The Silmarillion* appears to be based upon the composition of Genesis 1-11.