

The healing of Théoden or “a glimpse of the Final Victory”

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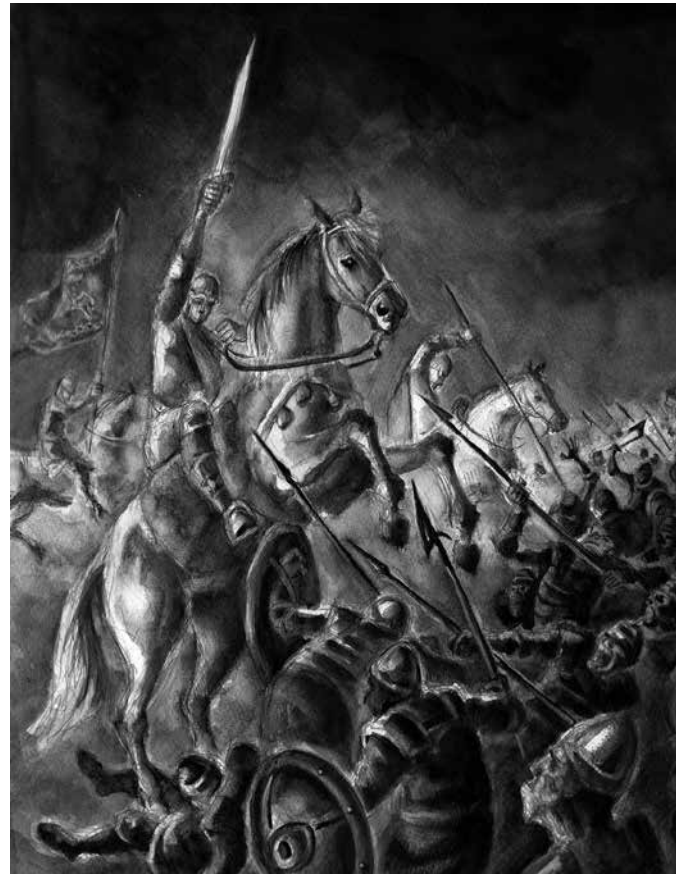
In a letter to Amy Ronald dated December 15, 1956 (letter n°195) Professor Tolkien wrote “I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic, so that I do not expect ‘history to be anything but a ‘long defeat’ – though it contains (and in legend may contain more clearly and movingly) some samples or glimpses of final victory”. Tolkien had adopted and incorporated this idea of “the long defeat” in his tales of Middle-earth. Galadriel uses this exact expression in *The Fellowship of the Ring* in the chapter The Mirror of Galadriel. Gandalf leaves no doubt in *The Return of The King* that any victory against Evil in Middle-earth can be only temporary and that the war will never be definitely won.

“If it [the Ring] is destroyed then He [Sauron] will fall [...] becoming a mere spirit of malice that gnaws itself in the shadows but cannot again grow or take shape. And so a great evil of this world will be removed. *Other evils there are that may come*¹; for Sauron himself is but a servant or emissary. Yet it is not our part to master all the tides of the world. [...] What weather [those who live after us] shall have is not ours to rule.” (The Return of the King - The Last Debate).

In *The Silmarillion* Tolkien is no more optimistic. After we have been told the events of the War of Wrath and the defeat of Morgoth, Tolkien states that even this victory is temporary “The lies that Melkor, the mighty and accursed, [...] sowed in the hearts of Elves and Men are seeds that does not die and cannot be destroyed; and ever and anon it sprouts anew, and will bear dark fruit even unto the latest days” (The Silmarillion – of the voyage of Eärendil)

If Tolkien has incorporated in his works the “long defeat”, he has, also, very likely, included some “glimpses of the Final Victory”. When one speaks of victories in *The Lord of the Rings*, we spontaneously think of the cockcrow echoed by the horns of Rohan during the siege of Minas Tirith, or of Aragorn’s standard floating at the prow of the flagship of the fleet of the pirates of Umbar when everything seems lost, or even of the fall of the Black Gate during the battle of the Morannon. Nevertheless those victories are military ones which will not last long and they have little to do with the *final [eschatological] victory* Tolkien was speaking of in his letter to Amy Ronald.

From a spiritual and Christian point of view, which was definitely familiar to Tolkien, there are in the Gospels two events announcing the real and final victory of Light over Darkness and Good over Evil, namely the resurrection of Jesus Christ on the one hand and Pentecost on the other hand. The resurrection is the victory over death, brought into the world when the Devil managed to deceive Adam and Eve and lure them into sin in the Garden of Eden. In



this sense the resurrection really is the Final Victory of Jesus Christ over the Enemy and sin. The meaning of Pentecost is of the same importance, even though it is not always perfectly understood. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* is perfectly clear on this point.

“On that day [Pentecost], the Holy Trinity is fully revealed. Since that day, the Kingdom announced by Christ has been open to those who believe in him: in the humility of the flesh and in faith, they already share in the communion of the Holy Trinity. By his coming, which never ceases, the Holy Spirit causes the world to enter into the “last days,” the time of [...] the Kingdom already inherited though not yet consummated” (article n°732).

Thus there is no doubt that Pentecost heralds the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth and marks the beginning of “the last days”, i.e. the eschatological time when the total Victory over Evil becomes a reality.

We happen to have in *The Lord of the Rings* a section, the healing of Théoden, which shows strong similarities with Pentecost, first in its narrative structure and also in its deeper meanings. The best way to point out those similarities may be to use a synoptic table.

PENTECOST

The apostles believed that Jesus Christ would be the future King but he has been betrayed and killed by his enemies

The apostles lock themselves in the Cenacle, the Upper Room, for fear of the outer world they consider hostile and dangerous.

Suddenly we have a sound like a mighty wind, and tongues of fire come down on them

The apostles fear no more they go outside to harangue the crowd

The apostles leave their country to evangelise the world. All of them (with the exception of St John) will suffer a violent death

All of this to prepare the return of the King (Jesus Christ) during the Parousia (see Catechism above)

HEALING OF THÉODEN

Théoden believed that Theodred would be the future King but he has been betrayed and killed by his enemies.

Théoden locks himself in Meduseld, the Upper Room, in Edoras for fear of the outer world he considers hostile and dangerous

Just after the irruption of Gandalf in Meduseld we have a loud noise in the form of a roll of thunder and a flash of lightning

Théoden fears no more, he goes outside and harangues his soldiers

Théoden leaves his country and will meet his end in a violent death far from his land

All of this to prepare the Return of the King (Aragorn)

We see that we have a remarkable correspondence between the structure of the tale of Pentecost and that of the healing of Théoden. However, at this stage, this could seem to be a mere coincidence because this passage in *The Lord of the Rings* seems to lack any supernatural element. Contrary to the pericope of the *Acts of the Apostles*² there is no obvious divine intervention. Nevertheless if we look closely we have several theophanies here.

Let us start with the thunder and the lightning. In the whole biblical tradition thunder and lightning are associated with an expression of the power of God. We have a good example in Exodus 19: 16-19, when God reveals for the first time his mightiness to the Hebrews “On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled [...] and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him in the thunder”. Another famous example can be found in the *New Testament* in John 12: 28-30 “Then a voice came from heaven saying ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again’. The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered [...] Jesus said, ‘this voice was for your benefit, not mine’”. A short time before the Last Supper, God the Father chooses to reaffirm the glory of the Son in a thunder-like voice. There is no doubts that Tolkien was very familiar with this meaning of the thunder in the Bible. His choice to include thunder and lightning during the healing of Théoden, points with certainty towards the numinous in one form or another.

It is true that in the Acts we have a loud noise even though it is not exactly thunder but a kind of gale. Instead of a peal of thunder we have tongues of fire coming on the apostles. Here again a mysterious fire is recurrently in the Bible the sign of God's presence. This is the case in Genesis 15: 17-18 when God makes his first covenant with Abraham. We have another example in Exodus 3 with the Burning Bush, or in 1 Kings 18 when Elijah defeats the priests of Baal in a sort of “magic duel”.

In Tolkien we have no real fire. However, Gandalf explicitly refers to a fire when he argues with Gríma a few seconds before he heals Théoden “a witless worm have you

become. Therefore be silent, and keep your forked tongue behind your teeth. I have not passed through *fire and death* to bandy crooked words with a serving man³”. What is this fire Gandalf alludes to? Can it be linked to an expression of the numinous in Middle-earth?

The first time I read *The Lord of the Rings*, I understood that this fire was that of the Balrog during his duel in the Mines of Moria. This interpretation is plausible and it is accepted by various tolkiendili. However, when considering a so called “theology of Arda”, this theory is not really satisfactory. How could a contact with the tainted and corrupting “dark fire of Udûn” give Gandalf more power and purity?

To have a better understanding, it is necessary to take a closer look on the exact nature of Gandalf's mission. He is an emissary of Manwë, the most powerful of the Valar, and he has been sent to Middle-earth to strive with the powers of darkness. Tolkien himself said that Manwë could be assimilated to the lord of the angels in the Christian tradition. We happen to have in the Bible an example of another emissary who, like Gandalf, volunteers to be sent into the world by a lord of the angels in Isaiah 6:1-8 “I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim [...] and the house was filled with smoke. So I said: “Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The Lord of hosts.” Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; Your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged.” Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: “Whom shall I send, And who will go for Us?” Then I said, “Here am I! Send me.”

Before commenting on this pericope, perhaps we should define a seraph. Mannerist painters of the 18th century have changed our conception of the original biblical idea. We tend now to see them as winged babies just good enough to fill the corners of paintings or murals. But in the biblical and Judaic tradition things are very different. Seraphs are six winged angels whose name literally means “the one who burns” and they are the formidable warders of heaven. In the

Christian tradition, according to the Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, they are still “the ones who burn” but they no longer burn their enemies, on the contrary they are burning out of love for the Almighty. The important point is that, in both of the earliest traditions, the seraphs are positioned at the top of the heavenly hierarchy. Lucifer, the mightiest of the angels before his rebellion is a seraph and Michael, his brethren who remained faithful, is one also.

Thus, there is no doubt that in the passage of the *Old Testament* quoted above, the seraph who purifies Isaiah is one of the most powerful, maybe the most powerful, angels of heaven. Therefore, it seems legitimate to make a comparison between this seraph and Manwë and between the sending of Isaiah and that of Olorin. We see that Isaiah has to “pass through fire” on his lips to be purified and to become worthy of his mission. This fire is a pure one coming from the altar of the Holy of Holies in Solomon’s shrine. Accordingly the fire through which Gandalf has passed has to be a pure and purifying one. It can’t be the “dark fire” of Melkor. The fire Gandalf is referring to when he speaks with Gríma is then much more likely the one he invokes on the bridge of Khazad-dûm just before his duel with the Balrog.

“I am a servant of the *Secret Fire*, wielder of the *flame of Anor*. You cannot pass⁴” (The Fellowship of the Ring – The Bridge of Khazad-Dûm).

We happen to know the exact nature of this Secret Fire and of the Flame of Anor. In his book *Tolkien and the Silmarillion* (Page 59) Clyde Kilby says “Professor Tolkien talked to me at some length about the use of the word “holy” in The Silmarillion. Very specifically he told me that the “Secret Fire” sent to burn at the heart of the World in the beginning was the Holy Spirit⁵”. Therefore, when Gandalf says that he has “passed through Fire”, we can assume without being too bold, that he means that he has received the Holy Spirit, that same Spirit which the apostles would receive, a thousand years later, at Pentecost. This creates a new correspondence between the tale of the healing of Théoden in *The Two Towers* and the account of Pentecost in the New Testament.

Let us turn back again to Gandalf’s sentence when he speaks with Gríma. Gandalf says that he not only passed through Fire, but also through Death. We know that Gandalf died in the Mines of Moria and was after sent back by Manwë to Middle-earth. At the beginning of this paper I said that Christian eschatology considers two different Final Victories, Pentecost and Resurrection during Easter night. The reference made by Gandalf to a death and a resurrection is therefore a clear allusion to the Final Christian Victory Tolkien was referring to in his letter to Amy Ronald.

But I think there is even more. For all Christians of any denomination, Baptism is the sacrament which enables one to receive the Holy Spirit. In this sense it is a sacrament of life, but it is even more so a symbol of a death followed by a

new birth. This is clearly explained in *the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (article 628)

“Baptism, the original and full sign of which is immersion, efficaciously signifies the descent into the tomb by the Christian who dies to sin with Christ in order to live a new life. We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life”.

If we accept a Christian reading of the passage of the healing of Théoden, then we can understand the words of Gandalf “I have passed through fire and death” as “I have been baptised in the Holy Spirit”.

Jesus’ last words just before his ascension into heaven are about the results of baptism “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved [...] And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils [...] They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover”. (Mark 16: 16-18). The parallel with Gandalf who overcomes Gríma and is not hurt by this “snake” and who is the cause of Théoden’s recovery seems obvious.

I am perfectly aware that such a Christian reading of this passage of The Lord of the Rings will seem far-fetched and even inappropriate to many. I certainly will not say that this is the only valid interpretation or that this interpretation is superior to other possible ones. I have merely tried to explain what I see in the Healing of Théoden when I read it. It is for me “a glimpse of the Final Victory” and I hope it can be of some interest to other readers.

Notes

- 1 My emphasis
- 2 For the complete passage of the Pentecost please see Acts 2 : 1-40.
- 3 My emphasis
- 4 My emphasis
- 5 My emphasis

All the quotation of the Bible are from the “New International Version” in the 1988 edition

Jean Chausse was born in France in 1963. He graduated in 1985 with honour of HEC Business School and has, since then, done most of his career in Finance. He currently lives in Hong Kong and is CFO of the largest Chinese food retailer. He was introduced to Homer by his father at the age of 7 and immediately fell in love with mythologies. He discovered Tolkien, merely by chance in 1986, and was enthralled by Middle-earth. Since then he dedicates some of his part time to Tolkien’s studies. He has already published several articles in *Mallorn* and in *Amon Hen*. He, also, has contributed to the French book *Pour la Gloire de ce monde, recouvrement et consolations en Terre du Milieu*