

Christian Theology as Depicted in *The Lord of the Rings* and the Harry Potter Books

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Abstract

One way theologians can help make Christian theology more relevant is to illustrate important Christian themes using examples drawn from contemporary culture. In this paper, I offer one example of such an analysis. Using J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter stories, I demonstrate how the vivid and creative portrayals of evil in the former and sacrificial love in the latter enhance our understanding of these two central Christian themes. Through this explication, I hope to show how contemporary books and movies can serve as an excellent resource for Christian theology.

Introduction

[1] There is a popular cultural misconception among many mainstream Christians that fantasy has no connection to reality; and further, that it has nothing to do with religious reality in particular. Books and movies that fall within this genre, such as those by J.R.R. Tolkien and J.K. Rowling, often are thought to be irrelevant and harmless at best, or dangerous and demonic at worst. This viewpoint, I believe, is both shortsighted and misguided.

[2] One of the reasons for this is that in order to be effective, theology must be meaningful, that is, meet people where they live, and make sense in the context of their lives. In order for theology to be meaningful, it must be relevant; and one important way for theologians to make the Christian faith both meaningful and relevant is to use symbols and language of contemporary culture to illustrate such theological concepts as salvation, justice, evil, grace, and forgiveness. In this article, I hope to demonstrate the fruitfulness of this type of theological analysis.

[3] In what follows, I use the two most popular current fantasy book/movie series, *The Lord of the Rings* and the Harry Potter books, to illustrate how fantastical stories and characters have the capacity to enhance our understanding of key Christian doctrines by depicting them in new and creative ways. That is, fantasy, with its use of myth and allegory, often describes vividly and persuasively central aspects of the Christian faith, and makes them more meaningful and more relevant in our daily lives.

[4] After outlining some background on J.R.R. Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings*, I will describe Tolkien's description of evil and the way in which Tolkien illustrates how evil is both an external force and an internal temptation. Then, again after some brief introductory remarks on Harry Potter, I will examine how the experience of God's unconditional love is powerfully and dramatically illustrated using Lily Potter's death, Harry's scar, and Harry's battle with Professor Quirrell/Lord Voldemort at the end of *The Sorcerer's Stone*. Using these two examples, I hope to show how certain examples of fantasy writing can be a resource for Christian theology and actually help enhance the explication of central Christian doctrines, as well as their significance in our daily lives.

[5] Before beginning with Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings*, something must be said about the significant differences between *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and the Harry Potter series. First, Tolkien's books reflect both his scholarly passion for language and myth – in fact, the idea for *The Lord of the Rings* came from his creation of the Elvish language – and his deeply felt Catholic Christian faith.¹ Both of these influences pervade Tolkien's books; he intentionally infused *The Lord of the Rings* with Christian imagery and sweeping mythological symbolism. By contrast, J.K. Rowling is not a scholar – which might be a significant reason why her books are so well-read – and her books do not have the gravitas of *The Lord of the Rings*: they are not grounded, for example, in a complicated, elaborate creation story such as *The Silmarillion*, which is Tolkien's original founding myth that gives rise to the whole of Middle Earth. Further, to my knowledge, Rowling has never spoken publicly about her faith, and she has certainly not relied on Christian tradition or doctrine in any sort of intentional way in writing her books. Finally, there is the fact that the reception of *The Lord of the Rings* has been almost universally favorable in Christian denominations, while the Harry Potter books have been criticized as being anti-Christian by many conservative Christian churches.

[6] However, in spite of these differences, I do believe it is legitimate to bring these two works together, given that they do share a similar literary genre, and thanks to the film industry, they have been lumped together by many moviegoers these past few years. In addition, they are also both stories ostensibly aimed at young adults, but which have garnered a devoted following among adults as well; hence, both series have cross-generational appeal.

J.R.R. Tolkien and the Background to *The Lord of the Rings*

[7] The importance of Tolkien's Christianity – in particular, his Catholic Christianity – for understanding the mythology of *The Lord of the Rings* is well known. As Joseph Pearce notes in his biography of Tolkien, "Christianity shines through every page" (10). Tolkien's friend, George Sayer, also remarked, "The Lord of the Rings would have been very different, and the writing of it very difficult, if Tolkien hadn't been a Christian. He thought it a profoundly Christian book" (Pearce: 100). And, finally, the fantasy writer Stephen Lawhead remarks, "What an extraordinary thing, I thought; though Tolkien makes never so much as a glancing reference to Jesus Christ in a single paragraph of all The Lord of the Rings' thick volumes, His face is glimpsed on virtually every page" (Pearce: 82).

[8] Given the importance of Tolkien's religious mindset for his works of fiction, there is not nearly enough time to discuss all the Christian symbolism that exists in the *The Lord of the Rings*.² Instead, I will focus on just one theme that is powerfully woven into the whole of the trilogy and bears unmistakable signs of Christian influence, that is, the concept of evil.

¹ Tolkien was named the Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford University in 1925, and his academic sub-specialty was the literature and language of Mercian, an Anglo-Saxon dialect. See Birzer, 105.

² One example of Christian symbolism that I cannot help but mention in a footnote is the depiction of the elfin bread, the *lembas*, which functions as a type of "eucharist" in the trilogy. So, for example, in two places in *The Return of the King*, we read about the power of the *lembas* to sustain, and its natural repulsion of evil. First, we find that both the Orcs and Gollum are disgusted by the *lembas*: "I guess they disliked the very look and smell of the *lembas*, worse than Gollum did. It's scattered about and some of it is trampled and broken . . ." (201). Then later, Tolkien writes, "The *lembas* has a virtue without which they would long ago have lain down to die. It did not satisfy desire, and at times Sam's mind was filled with the memories of food, and the longing for simple bread and meats. And yet this waybread of the Elves had a potency that increased as travelers relied on it alone and did not mingle it

[9] Tolkien's depiction of evil is particularly relevant for today's post -9/11 context given the increased tendency of politicians and other public figures to speak about good and evil in very black and white terms, as though they were two entirely separate entities that were clearly distinguishable. I doubt this fits the reality of most people's experience of evil. We are able to recognize a mixture of good and evil in many people; individuals whom we identify as "good" may act in ways that are "evil." We may even see evil in ourselves, though we usually think of ourselves as being "good" – at least most of the time. Tolkien very clearly recognized that evil is not so obviously discernable, and that the relationship between good and evil can be very complicated. And this perspective is a much-needed corrective for our society today.

[10] In order to understand Tolkien's core convictions about evil, we need to look to *The Silmarillion* and the creation story Tolkien describes there. Tolkien's story of creation begins with Iluvatar, the One, and the Ainur, the Holy Ones who were the offspring of Iluvatar's thought. One of the Ainur, Melkor, "fell," much like Satan, because he was not content with the music of Iluvatar, but wanted to introduce themes of his own design, and thus created discord and strife. Melkor, called the beginning of evil, wanted to rule Arda, the earth, and fought for dominion over it. Sauron was his greatest servant, described in *The Silmarillion* as "a sorcerer of dreadful power, master of shadows and of phantoms, foul in wisdom, cruel in strength, misshaping what he touched, twisting what he ruled" (156). After Melkor was imprisoned and banished from the world, Sauron became the primary agent of evil in Middle Earth. It was Sauron who formed the One Ring, the Ring of Power, and it is evil because Sauron poured his own strength and will into it. Thus, the Ring, perhaps even more than Sauron, becomes the instrument of evil in *The Lord of the Rings*.

The Depiction of Evil in *The Lord of the Rings*

[11] Tolkien believed very strongly in the power of evil, and more specifically, evil's power to corrupt us, which we see in several places in the story. The origins of the Orcs are one example. They were originally Elves who were enslaved and ensnared by Melkor, and their disfigured bodies reflect their poisoned souls. The creation of the Orcs is described in *The Silmarillion* as follows: The Elves "who came into the hands of Melkor . . . were put there in prison, and by slow arts of cruelty were corrupted and enslaved and thus did Melkor breed the hideous race of the Orcs in envy and mockery of the Elves, of whom they were afterwards the bitterest foes. For the Orcs had life and multiplied after the manner of the Children of Iluvatar; and naught that had life of its own, nor the semblance of life, could ever Melkor make . . . And deep in their dark hearts the Orcs loathed the Master whom they served in fear, the maker only of their misery. This it may be was the vilest deed of Melkor, and the most hateful to Iluvatar" (50). This theme comes back in the trilogy, in book three, where Frodo says to Sam, "The Shadow that bred them can only mock, it cannot make: not new real new things of its own. I don't think it gave life to the Orcs, it only ruined them and twisted them" (*The Return of the King*: 201).

[12] The origins of the Nazgul, the Ringwraiths, are another example. They used to be men – they were the nine men originally given the rings; but they were corrupted by the power of evil, and now are neither living nor dead. In *The Silmarillion* we read that "Darkness went with them, and they cried with voices of death" (289). In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien's describes the

with other foods. It fed the will, and it gave strength to endure, and to master sinew and limb beyond the measure of mortal kind" (227-28).

Lord of the Nazgul as follows: “The Black Rider flung back his hood, and behold! He had a kingly crown; and yet upon no head visible was it set. The red fires shown between it and the mantled shoulders vast and dark. From a mouth unseen there came a deadly laughter. ‘Old fool!’ he said. ‘Old fool! This is my hour. Do you not know Death when you see it?’” (*The Return of the King*: 100).

[13] This leads me to what I consider the most interesting aspect of Tolkien’s depiction of evil, described well by Tom Shippey. He notes that there is a “running ambivalence throughout the whole of *The Lord of the Rings*” that reflects an important ambivalence in Christian theology itself – that is, whether evil should be properly described as the privation of good, with no real substance in and of itself . . . or whether evil was a real force that must be resisted and fought by the forces of good . . .” (130). In other words, is evil the result of an internal disposition – St. Paul’s “evil I do not want is what I do” – or an external power that exercises dominion over us?

[14] Tolkien writes this ambiguity into every relationship individual characters have with the Ring. Both Galadriel and Gandalf are tempted by it when Frodo offers it to them, but they have the strength to refuse it. Bilbo has a terrible time giving it up, having possessed it for so long, but Gandalf finally convinces him – but not without a struggle. However, the fact that he was able to let it go is significant, and at least one author suggests that “In this single act not only does [Bilbo] break the cycle of murder and lies that surrounds the Ring, but in so doing he sets a precedent that may eventually allow the Ring to be destroyed” (Smith: 24). Both Aragorn and Faramir are able to resist the power of the Ring and work against it, but Boromir gave in to the temptation to wear the Ring, and his treachery cost him his life.

[15] Gollum, of course, is more corrupted by the Ring than any other character in the trilogy, and he bears the poisonous effects of the Ring on his own twisted, misshapen body. He once was a hobbit-like creature, but now only a whisper of Smeagol remains. I like Bradley Birzer’s description of Gollum, who writes, “The Ring as sin reshapes Gollum. Formerly a hobbit, he is now a disfigured shell of his former self, ‘stretched’ beyond what nature or Iluvatar had intended” (105). He says further, “To Gollum, [the Ring] is his ‘precious.’ It consumes him. One who wears it becomes slowly habituated to sin rather than to goodness, decorum, and virtue. The more one uses it, the more one ‘fades’: [one] becomes in the end invisible permanently, and walks in the twilight under the eye of the dark power that rules the Ring . . . and sooner or later the dark power will devour him” (105).

[16] There is a poignant moment in *The Two Towers* when we dare to believe that Gollum has been exorcised by Smeagol, and good has won out, but it cannot last. Sam overhears Gollum and Smeagol talking: two wills fighting over one body. Tolkien writes, “Smeagol was holding a debate with some other thought that used the same voice but made it squeak and hiss. A pale light and a green light alternated in his eyes as he spoke” (267). And if you have seen the movies, you know that this is perhaps one place where the visual image of the good and evil sides of Gollum/Smeagol is better than the written description (and, incidentally, this is one of the best visual illustrations I have seen for Martin Luther’s doctrine of *simul justus et peccator*). However, the good that was Smeagol does not win out after all. Gollum has worn the Ring too long, and in the end, he will die with it rather than be separated from it forever.

[17] Interestingly enough, Sam does not seem to be tempted by the Ring the way others are. In *The Two Towers*, when Sam thinks Frodo has been killed by Shelob the spider, he takes the Ring and puts it around his own neck. Sam’s temptation comes in *The Return of the King*, when he is

trying to rescue Frodo, and feeling that he will never succeed. The Ring's power seems to grow, and Sam sees visions of himself as a strong hero of the age, leading armies against Sauron, and becoming a great lord. Tolkien writes, Sam "had only to put on the Ring and claim it for his own, and all this could be. In that hour of trial it was the love of his master that helped most to hold him firm; but also deep down in him lived still unconquered his plain hobbit-sense: he knew in the core of his heart that he was not large enough to bear such a burden, even if such visions were not a mere cheat to betray him. The one small garden of a free gardener was all his need and due, not a garden swollen to a realm; his own hands to use, not the hands of others to command" (186). For some reason, perhaps because of the true *agape* love for Frodo that fills him, Sam resists the power of the Ring and is able to give it freely back to Frodo when he is rescued.

[18] Another place we can see Sam's seeming immunity to the temptation of the Ring comes in *The Return of the King*, when Sam takes an exhausted Frodo onto his back and carries him up the steep slopes of Mount Doom. Even though Frodo can hardly carry the Ring anymore because it has become such a burden, Sam does not seem to feel the weight of the Ring in the same way. Tolkien writes, "As Frodo clung upon his back, arms loosely about his neck, legs clasped firmly under his arms. Sam staggered to his feet; and then to his amazement he felt the burden light. He had feared that he would have barely strength to lift his master alone, and beyond that he had expected to share in the dreadful dragging weight of the accursed Ring. But it was not so. Whether because Frodo was so worn by his long pains, wound of knife, and venomous sting, and sorrow, fear, and homeless wandering, or because some gift of final strength was given to him Sam lifted Frodo with no more difficulty than if he were carrying a hobbit-child pig-a-back in some romp on the lawns or hayfields of the shire" (233). This seeming resistance to evil could be why at least one author, Bradley J. Birzer, argues that Sam is the true hero of *The Lord of the Rings* (71).

[19] It is in Frodo's relationship to the Ring, however, where we most clearly see the tension between our own inner temptation to evil, and the external power of evil over us. We see this very early in the trilogy, when Gandalf comes to Frodo to tell him the truth about the ring he has inherited from Bilbo. When Gandalf asks for it, we read that Frodo "unfastened it and handed it slowly to the wizard. It felt suddenly very heavy, as if either it or Frodo himself was in some way reluctant for Gandalf to touch it" (*The Fellowship of the Ring*: 54). Again, in the first book, when Frodo puts on the Ring to escape the treachery of Boromir, he sees the Eye of Sauron, and feels the power of the evil that seems to be both outside him and in him. Tolkien writes, "Frodo heard himself crying out: Never, never! Or was it: Verily I come, I come to you? He could not tell. Then as a flash from some other point of power there came to his mind another thought: Take it off! Take it off! Fool, take it off! Take off the Ring! The two powers strove in him. For a moment, perfectly balanced between their piercing points, he writhed, tormented. Suddenly he was aware of himself again. Frodo, neither the Voice nor the Eye; free to choose, and with one remaining instant in which to do so. He took the Ring off his finger" (451). Throughout the trilogy, sometimes the Ring feels heavy to Frodo, like it has its own evil power that is weighing him down; and other times, it seems to be Frodo who is lusting after it, sneaking peeks at it, and caressing it when he thinks no one is watching.

[20] At the end of *The Return of the King*, the question seems to be left open as well: Does Frodo give in to temptation, or is he overpowered by evil? Does Frodo make the choice to keep the Ring for himself, does he give into temptation; or does the power of the Ring finally become too

much for him, and against his will, is he led to put it on? Shippey argues that this ambivalence reflects a central truth about evil that we see in “The Lord’s Prayer,” when Christians ask both to be “led not into temptation” and also to be “delivered from evil.” Shippey writes, “Are these variants of each other, saying the same thing? Or (much more likely) do they have different but complementary intentions, the first asking God to keep us safe from ourselves . . . , the second asking for protection from the outside . . . ? If the latter is the case, then, Tolkien’s double or ambiguous view of evil is not a flirtation with heresy, but expresses a truth about the nature of the universe” (141).

[21] I agree with Shippey that this intentional balancing act is a great strength of *The Lord of the Rings*. As Shippey further notes, “We all recognize, in our better moments at least, that much harm comes from our own imperfections, sometimes terribly magnified, like traffic deaths from haste and aggression and reluctance to leave the party too soon: those are temptations. At the same time there are other disasters for which one feels no responsibility at all, like (as Tolkien was writing) bombs and gas chambers. They may in fact all be connected, as Boethius insisted: no human being can ever see enough to tell” (142).

[22] In my view, Tolkien’s nuanced and complicated portrayal of evil is much more authentic than the superficial black hats/white hats rhetoric contemporary culture seems to be so fond of, and Tolkien’s work thus offers society a deeper, more meaningful insight into Christian theology, and perhaps into individuals’ own experience with evil and temptation as well.

Christian Themes in the Harry Potter Narratives

[23] Before discussing the particulars of the Christian themes present in the Harry Potter books, I want to give a short defense of the books, because they are frequently castigated in some Christian circles. In my view, this condemnation is entirely unjustified. What is often charged is that the Harry Potter books are not good reading for children because they promote witchcraft, that they are too violent, that they promote deceit and lying – some people even argue that the books promote connections to the occult.

[24] I think those opinions are short-sighted and misinformed. Instead, there are some very central Christian themes that come up over and over again in each one of the books, making their presence impossible to ignore. Let me quickly suggest a few of these themes. First, we see repeatedly the act of self-sacrifice for a higher good and for others. This theme appears in book one, when Ron sacrifices himself in a chess match so that Harry and Hermione can keep going to the next test; in book two, when Dobby the house-elf risks his life to try and protect Harry; in book three, when Sirius Black escapes Azkaban prison, also risking his life to protect Harry from Peter Pettigrew, and when Harry and Hermione risk expulsion and punishment to rescue both Sirius and Buckbeak; and, of course, we see this most notably in book four, when Harry risks his life fighting Voldemort to bring back Cedric’s body to his parents.

[25] Another important theme is the struggle between good and evil, which is most obvious in *The Chamber of Secrets*, when Harry descends into the underground chamber to fight the evil serpent (the basilisk) and rescue Ginny “from the dead,” as it were; and in *The Goblet of Fire*, when the “cloud of witnesses” surrounds Harry when he is locked in the duel with Voldemort, and who are instrumental in helping him escape.

[26] There are also some interesting Christian themes in the story of Harry’s birth. When Harry was a baby, there were strange signs in the world, such as the appearance of hundreds of owls, as

well as shooting stars, perhaps reminding us of the appearance of the angels and the star of Bethlehem at Jesus' birth. Recall also the fact that Harry, as a baby, has to flee evil – this recalls both Jesus' flight into Egypt with Mary and Joseph, as well as Moses being put into the basket to escape death. Finally, Harry is brought up ignorant of his true identity, like Moses, learning of his identity only when he is ready to assume the responsibility of his heritage.

[27] Another important Christian theme recalls the Scriptural testimony that God does not see as the world sees, and that the world's judgment is often superficial and inaccurate. So, for example, Hagrid, although he looks rough and has a suspicious background, is one of the best, most loyal characters in the books. Remus Lupin, although he is a werewolf, is a good teacher, a true friend, and on the side of good, which we see most clearly in book five, *The Order of the Phoenix*. Finally, Gildery Lockhart, although he is handsome and famous, is actually shown to be a liar and a coward.

[28] The last theme I want to mention is that of Harry as a wounded healer. Over and over again, in numerous places in each book, the reader comes to see Harry as someone who suffers himself, even as he works to ease the sufferings of others. These are only a few of the many Christian themes that appear in the books, and there are other, more isolated examples as well, such as Peter Pettigrew as the Judas figure who betrayed James and Lily Potter to Voldemort (see Neal for more examples).

The Concept of Salvific Love

[29] Perhaps the most important Christian idea in the Harry Potter books comes in the event that started in all, the event that is the central thread running through each one of the books, Lily Potter's saving love for her son. Lord Voldemort, the evil force in the books, killed James and Lily Potter, Harry's parents, but he was unable to kill Harry because of his mother's love, and the effort broke his power and almost destroyed him.

[30] There are several strong Christian echoes in this scene. First, the mother giving her life for her son certainly reminds Christians of Jesus laying down his life for the world, sacrificing himself that all people might be saved (Neal: 7). Connie Neal writes that Harry's mother "took the curse on herself and died in his place" (126). Obviously, this is a major theme in Christian theology.

[31] The story also recalls the Christian baptismal liturgy, in which the child is baptized and then typically marked with the sign of the cross. The scar that Harry bears is an immediate sign to others of his identity, and it is for Harry and for others a physical mark of the battle against evil he won and the great loss he suffered in that battle. The scar is a constant reminder of who he is, that he is special as "the boy who lived," which is why Dumbledore refuses to fix it when Harry is a baby, even though he could have easily done so: "scars come in handy," Dumbledore says. This recalls the Christian belief that the mark of the cross, received in baptism, is also a lasting sign of God's blessing and love, which protects and sets the child apart.³ The cross, in its own way, functions as a mark of identity for Christians and a reminder of the battle Christ fought and won.

³ Neal writes: "As Lily Potter's act of self-sacrificial love saved Harry from the curse of death and made it so that the evil one could not touch him, the Bible says that those who are born of God through faith in the self-sacrificial death of Christ have a special protection" (48).

[32] And finally, the mystery of God's work in human lives, and the vision we have of it as seen "through a glass darkly" is echoed in the fact that Harry does not fully understand what happened to him as a child, and who he is, who he is becoming. His knowledge and understanding only grows over time, so that in each book we are presented with a little more information. So, for example, it is only in book four that we learn that Voldemort performed the most forbidden of the dark curses, the avada kedavra death curse, on Harry, and that he is the only person ever to have survived it (*The Goblet of Fire*: 216).

[33] The protection Lily's love has given Harry shows up at the end of the first book, when he is fighting Professor Quirrell/Voldemort. Quirrell finds that he cannot touch Harry without his own skin burning because the love of Harry's mother still marks and protects him, and that love is painful to someone so evil as Voldemort. Later, Professor Dumbledore explains it to Harry this way: "Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn't realize that love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign . . . to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever. It is in your very skin. Quirrell, full of hatred, greed, and ambition, sharing his soul with Voldemort, could not touch you for this reason. It was agony to touch a person marked by something so good" (*The Sorcerer's Stone*: 299).

[34] This view of self-sacrificial love, love that is stronger than death, love that blesses and protects, is a welcome elaboration upon a Christian theme that is perhaps so well-known that it has lost its power. The Christian story is very familiar in most segments of American mainstream culture, particularly after the movie "The Passion," but often it is not translated into real-life language that people can understand or relate to. What the Harry Potter books do is offer an easily understandable image of love that risks itself for the salvation of another, that creates a bond between two people that even death cannot break, that forms the identity of the beloved before he or she is even aware of it. People can understand love between parents and children, love between friends; and perhaps from there, they can more deeply grasp the Christian understanding of God's love.

Conclusion

[35] Obviously, there is much more to be said about both these book series. They are both rich treasure troves of images and themes that illustrate key Christian doctrines in original, vivid ways. In this way, they serve as an excellent resource for both pastors and teachers who are trying to help others understand and appreciate the Christian faith. One of the ways *The Lord of the Rings* series does this best is through a nuanced depiction of virtue, heroism, temptation, and wickedness that pushes the reader beyond simplistic concepts of good and evil, inviting her to see the complexity in their relationship. The Harry Potter books are less allegorical, but equally powerful in their imaginative and dramatic illustrations of important Christian themes of love, self-sacrifice, and identity. Both the books and the movies not only offer seasoned Christians a fresh look at their faith, but also newcomers an accessible, engaging way to begin conversation about Christian belief. In conclusion, these two book series illustrate that orthodox Christian theology can be found in the most unlikely of places, even in the genre of fantasy literature, and that it is often those places where Christian themes are explored in the most creative and powerful ways, ways that connect with people and invite them into a new and meaningful experience of the Christian faith.

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