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THE CATHOLIC CORE OF A CELEBRATED COMPOSITION
Alexander B. Koch

"I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations..." This quote, by famed author John Ronald Reuel (J.R.R.) Tolkien, highlights his obvious distain for allegory. Yet, despite an undeviating opinion on the subject, his greatest work *The Lord of the Rings*, is replete with free-floating allegory to Christian characters. Characters and situations that suggest Biblical situations, both narratively and on the level of spirituality and ethics. Each character within biblical text correlates with one or more characters in Tolkien's work, thus free floating. Tolkien is a devoutly religious author who processes the world, including his own fantasies, through the lens of his faith. While Tolkien draws from different elements of theology in several different ways—such as interchanging his characters to represent various aspects of key Biblical figures—it is clear that Tolkien assigned a moral, free-flowing, yet religious allegorical backbone to his work.

The Bible begins with the Old Testament: an overview of God's apparent creation of life and all its inhabitants. Tolkien's complete history of Middle Earth, *The Simarillion*, is the foundation story overlooked by most readers. To some, the first is *The Hobbit*. In that tale, the protagonist and his companions are tasked with an almost unmanageable deed and, although a few allegorical characters present themselves here, the bulk of said parable is within the trilogy: *The Lord of the Rings*. The opposition is set and the monumental undertaking of the protagonists made clear with this quote; "One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them," (*FOTR*, 49). The Ring of Power is at the centerpiece of the happenings in the legendarium, and the desire to possess its power causes evil to take seed and root in the hearts of most men, with the exception for Samwise Gamgee and Tom Bombadil.

Gollum, formally known as Sméagol, epitomizes a seemingly good soul who is corrupted by such power. The pull of the power of the One Ring changed him into a decrepit creature, "...with bent back and hands near the ground, like a beast and yet not of beast shape," (*FOTR*, 340).

When Gollum was known as Sméagol, the reader sees him fishing in the ponds of the Gladden fields with his cousin Déagol. While fishing, Déagol found the aforementioned ring in the pond. Overcome with desire and jealousy, Sméagol killed his cousin. The power of the One Ring overcame Sméagol, causing him to overlook his friendship and commit a murder in a place where such a sinful act was previously unheard of before Gollum's wrongdoing. This setting is akin to the Garden of Eden in the Bible, a paradise where evil had no place. Likewise, in the Book of Genesis, Cain has a similar issue. He and his brother, Abel, wished to please God through offering gifts, under the assumption that they would gain favor from Him. Abel produces a more pleasing gift for God and, overcome with jealousy, Cain slays him: "when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him," (Genesis 4:8). This act of murder, in both cases, was the first account of murder in an almost sin-free land. The desire of both Cain and Gollum—for God's love and the Ring respectively—made cause for each character to commit a vile act. Each player was affected by and subsequently marked by their respective sources of power, Cain by God and Gollum by the Ring, causing elongated life and nomadic tendencies in both. Sméagol, now Gollum at this point, was ostracized by his town and forced to wander Middle Earth, slowly descending into madness because of his "precious." In spite of Gollum's punishment for his actions, Frodo, ring-bearer and protagonist of the Trilogy, ordered that Faramir's soldiers leave Gollum unharmed when he (Gollum) was caught fishing in the Forbidden Pools, much like the forgiving power of Jesus. Like Gollum, Cain was also forced to adapt a "vagabond" lifestyle and wander the Earth, marked by God to not be slain. Though the

theme of inter-family strife remains within both the Bible and the *Lord of the Rings*, in the following instance, it has a contrasting motivation.

Next, a prominent correlation within *The Lord of the Rings* is a comparison of the tale of God's Archangel Michael and the wizard Gandalf, a Maiar. Michael is the most trusted General of the Lord, and Gandalf is the wisest and most trusted of the Maiar, servants of the Valar, who then serve Eru Ilúvatar. Eru Ilúvatar is Tolkien's version of God in the *Silmarillion*: the aforementioned origin story. Michael and Gandalf are generals at heart, and both lead armies of angels and men respectively. In the legendarium, Gandalf fights along elves: a race of innately pure beings with abilities beyond the realm of men, as their leader. Elves closely parallel angels because, like angels, elves live separate from mankind. The only difference is that elves do not have free will, due to their goodness; angels do. Angels in the Bible, other than Lucifer, are innately good creatures who are indeed from a different world. In the book of Daniel, the Archangel Michael is said to lead any army against Satan—his brother—and his minions, supposedly in the distant future. Like Michael, Gandalf does the same: "There suddenly upon a ridge appeared a rider, clad in white, shining in the rising sun. Over the low hills the horns were sounding. Behind him, hastening down the long slopes, were a thousand men on foot; their swords were in their hands," (TT, 529). In both the Bible, and in Tolkien literature, an extremely powerful character rises up to lead an army in the battle against evil.

In Christian mythology, Michael steps up to battle the dragon of Satan. "Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down -- that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him," (Revelation 12:7-9). Satan is

presented as a dragon, much like the mythical creature of the Balrog in Tolkien literature.

Linking the two generals of Michael and Gandalf, Gandalf faces the Balrog, a minion of Sauron, in the inauguration of the journey. There he said his most illustrious utterance, “you shall not pass.”

“You cannot pass,” . . . , “I am a servant of the Secret Fire, wielder of the flame of Anor. You cannot pass.” . . . , “but the darkness grew. It stepped forward slowly on to the bridge and suddenly it drew itself up to a great height, and its wings were spread from wall to wall; but still Gandalf could be seen, glimmering in the gloom.” . . . , “There was a ringing clash and a stab of white fire. The Balrog fell back and its sword flew up in molten fragments.” . . . , “With a terrible cry the Balrog fell forward, and its shadow plunged down and vanished,” (ROTK, 322).

Gandalf falls with the creature and Michael triumphs against Satan. Though the result is different, parallels are evident. Not only does Gandalf fight the Balrog, emblematic of Michael’s fight in Revelations, the wizard also faces off against the Witch King, who rides a fell beast: described as a large winged and featherless monster. The opposition, the orcs and Sauron who fight alongside the Balrog and Witch King, are a truly evil race of created hell-bent on domination. Hell-bent is an apt description, as the foes of Gandalf and his associates clearly equate to Satan—or Lucifer—and his followers in the Bible. Michael and Gandalf are mutually trusted servants of their prospective Gods, and both are relentless soldiers in their battles against evil. Gandalf is a very interesting character. His actions throughout the legendarium allow for his deeds to correlate with numerous characters from Biblical texts. He is a general of elves, much like Michael, and although these characters deliver a very clear and concise parable to one another, it is almost sinful to highlight Christian allegory without mention of Jesus. Tolkien’s

free floating allegory allows for Gandalf, amongst others, to parallel Christ, as well as other Biblical figures.

The most notable Christian metaphor within the legendarium is that of Christ, and the several characters exemplify the way Jesus is portrayed in the Bible. To look at the Bible in a literary sense, Jesus is the protagonist of the New Testament. He is described as a wanderer who was resurrected, a healer and king, a truly good being, not only a religious leader but also a martyr for his cause. In accordance to free floating allegorical nature of Tolkien's work, Gandalf, who has already been revealed as a parallel to Michael, also exemplifies one of the characteristics of Jesus. Although Gandalf began as the leader like Michael, tragedy struck in his fight with the Balrog. Following the battle, the Balrog caught hold of the wizard, and dragged him into the void: "He staggered and fell, grasped vainly at the stone, and slid into the abyss," (FOTR, 322). The troops thought all hope was lost, much like the disciples after Jesus's death yet, there was a light of hope in the midst. In the forest of Fangorn, Gimli, Legolas, and Aragorn encountered a man sulking among the trees. Thinking it was Saruman, the trio attempted to attack, but were surprised at who they saw. There was Gandalf, reborn in white. Recounting his story, Gandalf said, "Naked I was sent back – for a brief time, until my task is done..." (TT, 491). The wizard was resurrected to complete his task, much like Jesus in Luke 24:6, "He is not here, but is risen." Jesus was resurrected to complete his task in another realm, while Gandalf returned to the place he once inhabited. Rebirth is synonymous with the Bible, and the way Gandalf returned—after days of suffering—is of tantamount importance. Before the resurrection, Jesus wandered the earth in hopes of bettering it. Gandalf also exemplifies Jesus's portrayal of that of a wanderer. The character of Gandalf, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, is a wizard of immense power who wanders Middle Earth while attempting to complete the task of

eradicating evil. Like Jesus, who had twelve disciples, Gandalf had eight other members of the fellowship whom he led. Though there is a difference in number, the idea of a holy being retaining followers is metaphorical, considering Tolkien's pious background.

Although Gandalf was a leader in the opening of the *Lord of the Rings*, that burden was passed to another true leader following his supposed death: Aragorn. Aragorn was a Ranger of the North, subsisting in a simple, inconspicuous life, his only desire to do what is right for the people. Though these traits fit the man, the poem, "All that is gold does not glitter," that ends with, "The crownless again shall be king," covers the truth behind Aragorn, (FOTR 167). In the beginning of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Aragorn is an unpretentious man, but this is misleading. He is Isildur's heir and the rightful king of Gondor. Jesus assumes a similar countenance: "He hath no form nor comeliness, and when we shall see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him." In Isaiah 53:2 Jesus is not a desired specimen, but a mere commoner that has seemingly no importance. Yet, like Aragorn, Jesus is mentioned as the king of heavens and men, creating everlasting peace. In addition to a king, Christ was mentioned numerous times as being a healer: curing blindness, diseases, and other ailments. The same goes for Aragorn: "the hands of the king are the hands of a healer," (ROTK, 842). Aragorn, like Jesus, waits to sit atop his throne once his work is finished: the healing he does with his (Aragorn) handy use of kingsfoil. Upon completion of their respective missions, both Jesus and Aragorn are said to bring years of peace to their kingdoms.

Other characters exhibit a Christ-like character. Jesus did not begin as a king, but as a carpenter and faithful servant of God. In accordance with Jesus, Samwise Gamgee began as a humble gardener, a faithful servant and later friend of Frodo the ring bearer. Throughout the tale, Sam is described as an astute judge of character, and an innately good being, though he is a

hobbit. In the pit of Shelob, after Frodo's supposed death, Sam takes the ring from Frodo out of love, his sole and unselfish desire to continue what his friend and master started. However, after finding Frodo alive, Sam turned back around, compelled to rescue Frodo from orc-filled tower. Once Frodo regains consciousness, he requests the ring back from Sam. Though this is a monumental task for every other character in the books, with the exception of Tom Bombadil, Sam did not have any desire for the Ring of Power. Sam selflessly removes it out of love, and returns it to Frodo. The irony of Sam's thoughts—that, as an ordinary gardener, and he feels that he is too common to wear the Ring—is that he is actually one of the Ring's safest keepers, relatively unaffected by the selfishness it provokes. Both he and Jesus are good, faithful, and loving friends. As Jesus once said, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friend." (John 15:13). Sam would do the exact same thing for Frodo, though he as a character lacks the celibacy Jesus had after his (Sam's) marriage.

Finally, the most common allegory between Jesus in the Bible and a character within the legendarium is the protagonist: Frodo Baggins. Frodo takes on the task of holding the ring throughout the journey, much like it was Jesus' task to deliver the word of God. In the Catholic religion, it is said that only the Son can deliver the word of God, paralleling the fact that in Tolkien's work, only Frodo can deliver the ring to Mount Doom. In their quests to distribute the word of God and deliver the ring, both Jesus and Frodo bear unimaginable torment. Jesus's twelve disciples put faith in him to complete this task, much like the Fellowship of the Ring believes in Frodo. In addition, in each example there is assumed desolation to be wrought if either—man or hobbit—fails at their task. Each character was more than willing to die to eradicate sin: for Jesus it was the sin of man, and for Frodo it was the power and sin associated with the ring. Though these characters both reach divinity as a result of their trials, they mutually

suffer the temptations of the very thing which they are tasked to fight against, and transform into better men, or gods, before each of their tasks is completed. When Frodo reaches Mount Doom, he struggles about destroying the Ring, tempted to keep it for himself. "I have come," he said. "But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!" (ROTK, 924). Frodo wavers when he contemplates keeping the ring, at that moment and all alone, he believed he earned it after his suffering. Christ too wavered on the cross, and therefore makes Frodo's humanity understandable. As Jesus was hanging from the cross, after being verbally and physically abused by all those around him, as well as his disciples, "...about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). Christ cries out to his Father, God according to the Bible, asking why he had deserted him in a moment such as this. In this instance, Christ falters, just like Frodo at Mount Doom. Although they both have a moment of darkness and despair, like true heroes, Christ and Frodo persevere, and ultimately, fulfill their quests.

Without supporters, Jesus, and those who play his part *Lord of the Rings*, would have either been unable to continue their tasks, or would have finished their missions much earlier. Within the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Sam plays multiple roles that correlate to Biblical figures, and, thanks to Tolkien's free-floating Christian allegory, this pertains to Gollum as well. Sam can be thought of to represent not only to Jesus, but also one of his disciples Simon, who is renamed Peter. Peter was the first disciple listed in the book of Matthew, much like Sam was the first to join the Fellowship. While Sam is shown to be a more devoted friend to Frodo than Peter to Jesus, both forsake their own Christ figure (Frodo and Jesus) at least once. Peter is told by Jesus, "Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, That this night, before the cock crow, thou

shalt deny me thrice,” (Matthew 26:34). Indeed, Peter denies to a woman that he knows Jesus, abandoning him, and thereby proves the prophecy correct when Peter refutes his devotion to his savior. Sam, on the other hand, only abandons his Christ when he believes he (Frodo) is dead. In another equivalent action, Peter and Sam both rescind their desertion later. The two also share parallels in the fact that “Samwise is elected Mayor of the Shire,” while Peter becomes the first Pope, “And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it,” (ROTK, 1071), (Matthew, 16:18). Following their almost—with brief exceptions—unwavering devotion to their Christs, Sam and Peter become leaders in their given arenas, all thanks to said devotion and belief in the sanctity of their masters.

Although there are loyal followers in the trilogy and the Bible, both also have backstabbers. Free-floating allegory yet again allows Gollum to mirror Judas. Judas began as a follower of Jesus, much like Gollum was to Frodo. Through a hard exterior, Gollum almost seemed to love Frodo, caressing Frodo’s leg while he was sleeping. That all changed when Gollum misinterprets Frodo’s intentions to save him from Faramir, causing any semblance of love Gollum had for Frodo to dissipate. Gollum then made plans to entrap Frodo and Sam in the lair of spider Shelob, betraying them, “It’s a trap!” (TT, 703). Gollum did not truly believe Frodo was worthy to hold the ring, as it was his (Gollum’s) precious. Likewise, Judas is infamous for his betrayal of Jesus, supposedly due to the belief that he never truly believed Jesus was the son of God. Judas once followed Jesus, but his animosity grew over time. In a parallel prophecy, Sam foretold the betrayal of Gollum, just as Jesus foretold the betrayal of Judas, “Whomsoever I shall kiss, that same is he: hold him fast. And forthwith he came to Jesus, and said, Hail, master; and kissed him. And Jesus said unto him, Friend, wherefore art thou come? Then came they, and

laid hands on Jesus, and took him.” (Matthew 26:48-50). Judas betrayed his master out of jealousy and hatred, and Gollum did just the same. Gollum wanted his “precious” for himself.

To devout Christians, taking one’s life is also one of the greatest sins a person can commit. Gollum and Judas take their own lives; creating an afterlife for themselves this writer does not want to even speculate about. As Peter and Sam both follow their Christ to peace and salvation, Gollum and Judas’s ends are dark because of their betrayals. Gollum, in a final attempt to take the ring from Frodo, wrestles with the protagonist, getting the ring as a result. “‘Precious, precious, precious!’ Gollum cried. ‘My Precious! O my Precious!’ and with that, even as his eyes were lifted up to gloat on his prize, he stepped too far, toppled, wavered for a moment on the brink, and then with a shriek he fell. Out of the depths came his last wail *Precious*, and he was gone,” (ROTK 925). Gollum, a follower of Frodo, betrayed his Christ because Gollum did not believe Frodo was the rightful ring bearer. Judas felt the same way about Jesus and, after realizing his mistake, ended his own life:

“When Judas, who had betrayed Him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was filled with remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders. “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood,” he said.

“What is that to us?” they replied. “You bear the responsibility.”

So Judas threw the silver into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself,” (Matthew 27:3-5).

Judas is overcome with guilt about his actions and, knowing his master is condemned to death, takes his own life. Although Gollum and Judas have different motives for their duplicity, they prove allegory to be present in the work because they betray their Christ figures out of disbelief

and jealousy, and lose their lives as a result. Judas and Gollum present a necessary engine by which redemption of the world happens, though these disciples betray their masters.

The Lord of the Rings trilogy has repeated and pervasive free-floating allegory to Christian text woven within its pages. Although author J.R.R. Tolkien is reticent to admit it, his work is replete with said correlations as he continuously interchanges his characters to represent the changing motives, desires, and actions of the key Biblical figures. In addition, Tolkien bases the trilogy on an overarching quest to save the masses from the evil of the ring, which can be equated as the New Testament mission to bring the word of God to the people. Whether it is Frodo, Sam, Gandalf, or Gollum, each character within the legendarium presents a parallel to those in Biblical texts. Through their reading, many of Tolkien's contemporaries wish to have him canonized—through a lighthearted campaign— as one of the great Catholic writers; suggesting sainthood for the way *Lord of the Rings* brings people to God. J.R.R. Tolkien did not intend to bring people closer to God by reading his words, however, in the *Lord of the Rings* and the New Testament alike, both quests bring salvation to the world.

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*FOTR – Fellowship of the Ring

*TT – Two Towers

*ROTK – Return of the King