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Christophany in The Lord of the Rings

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Christophany in The Lord of the Rings

J.R.R. Tolkien's writing has been widely associated with Christianity, and more specifically, Catholicism. I believe this association is rooted in his strength of faith while living and isolating presence in the fantasy genre as religious. Tolkien's life of faith undoubtedly influenced his writing and continues to tie his Legendarium to Christianity today. With allegorical readings written on nearly every piece of his work, I believe the most decisive understanding of his faith influencing his work is in the "Christophanies," or manifestations of Christ, present throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. These "Christophanies" are produced in multiple characters, reminiscent of the numerous biblical instances of a nearly Christ-like presence. I have seen these images of Christ-like characteristics most clearly in Frodo, Gandalf, and Aragorn, and their adverse, surprisingly, Bilbo. Throughout much of *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Two Towers* we are repeatedly presented with actions revealing a nature of "Christophany" as these characters are developed. Tolkien is said to have disliked allegorical text, however, I argue that this personification of Christ is what allows for an allegorical reading of his work. These ties to Christianity strengthen the identity of these characters as inherently "good" and offers an easily read alignment with the forces defeating evil.

Frodo's identity as the "Ring-bearer" allows for an incredibly simple association to Christ. His bearing, or taking on, of the inherent evil threatening his world very obviously reflects the idea of Christ bearing the sins of the world. Frodo takes on the seemingly impossible task with hesitancy, yet resilience, nonetheless. Tolkien writes, "'I do really wish to destroy it!' cried Frodo. 'Or, well, to have it destroyed. I am not made for perilous quests. I wish I had never seen the Ring! Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?'" (Tolkien 67). Though he does not understand why he is the one to do so, Frodo understands the threat an evil such as the Ring brings to his peaceful world. He knows he may be unworthy, but he accepts the journey to save the lives he cherishes. After reflecting on the unimaginable information Gandalf shares at the very beginning of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Frodo says, "As far as I must keep the Ring and guard it, at least for the present, whatever it may do to me... I should like to save the Shire, if I could...I feel that as long as the Shire lies behind, safe and comfortable, I shall find wandering more bearable: I shall know that somewhere there is a firm foothold, even if my feet cannot stand there again" (Tolkien 68). His want to destroy the Ring does not come from a place of greed. He does not desire power or influence for his role in keeping such evil from the lives of those he values, he simply wants to keep them from harm. Frodo's "Christophany" in realizing the importance of his journey reflects even the knowledge that those being saved are unworthy. He reflects earlier in this passage upon the stupidity and dullness of his neighbors but determines to become their savior anyway. This sacrificial nature can be read clearly as reminiscent of Christ.

His newfound role as "Ring-bearer" puts Frodo in a position that he has only experienced through his time with Bilbo. As the keeper of such power, he begins his journey of temptation when he receives the Ring. Frodo is fortunately able to learn of the temptation he will experience before feeling it in full. Gandalf's sharing of his acquired knowledge of the Ring saves Frodo from the overwhelming and nearly irreversible power the Ring had over Bilbo. He does feel a tie to it initially, though. During their conversation on its immense power, the Ring's influence over Frodo is immediately seen. "The gold looked very fair and pure, and Frodo thought how rich and beautiful was its colour, how perfect was its round-ness. It was an admirable thing and altogether precious. When he took it out he had intended to fling it from him into the very hottest part of the fire. But he found now that he could not do so, not without a great struggle" (Tolkien 66). His

hatred for the Ring and fear of its power over him only grows as he bears it. By the middle of only the first novel, it is clear that its continued power over him takes its toll. "He was shaken by a sudden shame and fear; and he felt a great reluctance to reveal the Ring, and a loathing of its touch" (Tolkien 277). He both understands the gravity of the temptation he must endure and despises its influence. In this, he questions his qualifications for holding such power, while knowing he is chosen for it. Bilbo's ability to resist such overwhelming power for so long, and give it up in the end, calls for a somewhat justified notion of Frodo being the "Ring-bearer," no matter how much he loathes it falling in his hands.

Frodo's acknowledgement that he may not be qualified to be chosen for such a task may be read as a "Christophany" as well. Beginning in *The Hobbit* the simplicity of hobbits is continually discussed. They are deemed plain and unimportant, garnering disrespect from Gandalf's peers for his curiosity with them. I believe this successfully represents the same simplicity of humanity is the story of Christ. The idea that this savior is but a simple being emphasizes the important nature Frodo captures in this "Christophany." Gandalf discusses the nature of hobbits saying, "Ever since Bilbo left I have been deeply concerned about you, and about all these charming, absurd, helpless hobbits" (Tolkien 52). Their diminished status in Middle-Earth allows for Frodo to take an air of unthreatening nature to those they encounter. His simplicity garners both respect and protection in the form of the Fellowship.

Such unity as the Fellowship is easily associated to the Apostles, if read with a Christian view. Aragorn's "Christophanies" are shaped by this unity. He naturally steps into a role as a leader of the Fellowship, guiding the men to restore peace. His role as a leader is apparent at multiple points in the novels, particularly after the deaths of a member of the Company. Gandalf's death acts as an incredibly poignant piece of the story, but Aragorn refuses to be deterred from his mission. He takes on the role of leader with, "'Farewell Gandalf!' he cried... 'What hope have we without you?' He turned to the Company. 'We must do without hope,' he said. 'At least we may yet be avenged. Let us gird ourselves and weep no more! Come! We have a long road, and much to do'" (Tolkien 373). The death of such an important figure is obviously disheartening, but Aragorn's respectful confidence and guidance allows him to become a savior-like leader. His commitment to restoring peace leads him to suffer but do so while leading others on this journey to defeat evil.

Aragorn is also comparable to Christ in his humility. Being the son of a powerful ruler, he has the ability in both power and circumstance to domineer over others. Instead, he chooses to live simply. Aragorn's simple nature is how he is introduced. He does not even introduce himself by his name, going by "Strider" instead. His quiet work for justice matches his humble appearance at the beginning of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. It is not until the Council of Elrond that his true identity is revealed. Even then, he is described saying, "in a corner alone Strider was sitting, clad in his old travel-worn clothes again" (Tolkien 269). He does not reveal his influential status or upstanding birthright but lives a humble life. It is not until he is questioned that his name is given. Similar to Frodo, this humility is reflective of the humility of Christ. I believe Aragorn's livelihood is more reflective of a Christian ideology, however, because of his simplicity. While Frodo doubts his place, Aragorn takes his role in the destruction of the Ring with honor and a simple want for peace.

When Aragorn's identity is revealed he holds tightly to his humble demeanor, not even confronting Boromir's questionings himself. "'And who are you and what have you to do with Minas Tirith?' Asked Boromir, looking in wonder at the lean face of the Ranger and his weather-stained cloak. 'He is Aragorn son of Arathorn,' said Elrond; 'and he is descended through many

fathers from Isildur Elendil's son of Minas Ithil. He is the Chief of the Dúnedain in the North, and few are now left of that folk" (Tolkien 276-277). His power and wisdom are concealed by his meager appearance. This quality also leads to a reading of a "Christophany." Aragorn's status provides him accessibility to the peace he strives for, yet he does not use it. He is the son of powerful men, but men, nonetheless. His humanity ties him to the people he wants to restore order for, the victims of the violence the Ring brings about. His physical ability to make a change in his world ties him to an embodiment of Christ. He wants for peace and justice, and physically works to make it happen.

Lastly, Gandalf offers clear associations to Christ-like qualities. His wisdom, resistance of temptation, and, most importantly, sacrificial death and resurrection makes him a character that clearly embodies Christ. Again, from the beginning of *The Hobbit*, Gandalf's wisdom is apparent. He acts as a guide in both knowledge and travel, interacting with a majority of the characters in the novels. Gandalf's being is remarkable for readers and characters alike to encounter. His immense knowledge is seen in his limited interaction with the Ring in *The Hobbit* and *The Fellowship of the Ring*. While informing Frodo of its power, Gandalf reads the evil and ancient inscription on the Ring, saying, "This is the Master-ring, the One Ring to rule them all. This is the One Ring that he lost many ages ago, to the great weakening of his power. He greatly desires it – but he must *not* get it" (Tolkien 55). Gandalf's knowledge of the Ring and its power supersedes many other's. His understanding that the Ring Bilbo and Frodo, simple hobbits, hold is the Ring of Power is incredible. When no others realize its importance, Gandalf does. His wisdom exceeds those he encounters, even the most powerful of his equals. In his confrontation of Saruman in *The Two Towers* Gandalf's wisdom is clear. He addresses Saruman laughing, "I fear I am beyond your comprehension. But you, Saruman, I understand now too well. I keep a clearer memory of your arguments, and deeds, than you suppose" (Tolkien 206). Later in this confrontation he speaks of freedom for Saruman saying, "When his eyes turn hither, it will be the red eye of wrath. But when I say "free", I mean "free": free from bond, of chain or command: to go wherever you will, even, even to Mordor, Saruman, if you desire" (Tolkien 207). This passage in particular emphasizes Gandalf's wisdom in consort with his just nature. As his character develops, his role throughout the trilogy becomes one centered on the importance of knowledge. He seems to be a sort of all-knowing being, one the other characters look to for wisdom, encouragement, reassurance, and advice. It is because of this that Gandalf can effectively be seen as a "Christophany."

Gandalf's wisdom is also clear in his knowledge of the temptation the Ring will impart on him. After advising Frodo on the Ring's power, there is a moment in which Gandalf seems to almost snap. Frodo, scared of the power he holds and his journey ahead, offers Gandalf the Ring to destroy. His response affirms all that he had said. The Ring is far too powerful for him to hold, and Frodo must take this task as his own. "'No' cried Gandalf, springing to his feet. 'With that power I should have power too great and terrible. And over me the Ring would gain a power still greater and more deadly.' His eyes flashed and his face was lit by a fire within. 'Do not tempt me!'" (Tolkien 67). This scene offers insight into the way Tolkien's story will unfold. The almost supernatural way in which Gandalf reacts to such power being offered not only demonstrates his power and wisdom but reflects the strength of his ability to resist such temptation. This temptation possibly weighs on Gandalf more than many other characters. Men, elves, and hobbits would be made monsters by the power of the Ring and Gandalf understands the almost unimaginable power a wizard like himself would bear with such evil resting on his finger.

Because of this, his ability to resist the temptation becomes even more of a “Christophany” than the resistance of Frodo or the others of the Company.

Finally, Gandalf’s sacrificial death and resurrection can be undeniably connected to the death and resurrection of Christ. As one of the most blatant “Christophanies” presented, it is clear that Tolkien’s use of Gandalf as a powerfully guiding presence was not one that could be destroyed completely. His death is one of total sacrifice. After his iconic, “You cannot pass!” Gandalf defeats the Balrog, effectively saving his companions, while sacrificing himself (Tolkien 371). “With a terrible cry the Balrog fell forward, and its shadow plunged down and vanished. But even as it fell it swung its whip and the thongs lashed and curled about the wizard’s knees, dragging him to the brink. He staggered and fell, grasped vainly at the stone, and slid into the abyss. ‘Fly, you fools!’ he cried, and was gone” (Tolkien 37). The sacrificial and brutal death Gandalf is submitted to is undoubtedly reminiscent of Christ. His willingness to die for the sake of the others, sacrificing his entire being, is one of the most important moments of the story as well. It completely changes the dynamic of the group, taking their wise leader from them. Without Gandalf they are left to decide how to complete their journey without a vital part of the wisdom that began it.

Though he may not travel with those he began the journey with any longer, Gandalf’s wisdom weighs on their minds and actions. Before his return in *The Two Towers*, Gimli remembers Gandalf’s wisdom saying, “But Gandalf spoke of a rumor that they pay tribute to Mordor” and Pippin thinks of their time together with, “in those days the plans for the journey seemed to be in much more competent hands, and he had never reckoned with being cut off from Gandalf” (Tolkien 24, 52). It is clear that the wizard was an important piece in their perilous journey and is greatly missed. In his absence the group is separated and begins to have individual battles with the tribulations of their journey. Gandalf’s return is nothing but relief. His importance to the Fellowship is clear, so his ability to guide them once more, with an elevation in being is miraculous and welcomed. I believe the simple fact that he resurrects is significant in its reflection of Christ, but even more so in his lack of recognition by Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas. “At last Aragorn stirred. ‘Gandalf!’ he said, ‘Beyond all hope you return to us in our need! What veil was over my sight? Gandalf!’ Gimli said nothing, but sank to his knees, shading his eyes” (Tolkien 102). The reverence that his companions greet Gandalf with reiterates his importance. They are grateful and relieved by his return, but they also show a deep sense of respect for the man that returned from the death they watched happen. The entire scene in which he reveals himself to them can be read as a “Christophany.” Gandalf’s presence is nearly heavenly in his newfound white appearance. I believe this specific moment of Gandalf in the Legendarium makes it clear that he may be seen as a representation of Christ in the novels.

If read allegorically while noticing these images of Christ presented, Tolkien’s work can be understood with an entirely new depth. This depth is then intensified by Bilbo’s contradictory nature. Bilbo works to represent humanity and a submission to sin when Christ is considered in the trilogy. He presents a clear antithesis to the “Christophanies” of the novels, demonstrating the downfall of morality when temptation becomes reality. Frodo’s reflection on his unworthiness to bear the evil of his world is rooted in his relationship with Bilbo. He sees firsthand the greed and frenzy the Ring’s temptation of power causes and is able to avoid subjecting himself to the same while beginning to understand the lowliness of those he will be saving. Aragorn offers a view of leadership and humility, one that is contrasted in Bilbo’s cowardice and greed. Bilbo is unable to resist the temptation of the Ring and though he lived a quiet life after his adventure, he reveled in his wealth and most “precious” possession. Gandalf’s wisdom and sacrifice is opposed in the

same way. Bilbo provides a stark contrast to the powerful Gandalf's wealth of knowledge and willingness to sacrifice himself for the better of the Fellowship. These characters' specific embodiments of Christ are discreetly opposed in their companion's submission to temptation in the Ring. Through these contradictions, Bilbo's role as a nascent example of the corruption of man strengthens Tolkien's epic tale of good vs. evil. Tolkien calls for a deeper reflection on the battle between good and evil by exhibiting a spectacle of temptation. He takes a beloved character and makes him a monster, straining the relationship between uncle and nephew, friend and friend, saying, "Bilbo put out his hand. But Frodo quickly drew back the Ring. To his distress and amazement he found that he was no longer looking at Bilbo; a shadow seemed to have fallen between them, and through it he found himself eyeing a little wrinkled creature with a hungry face and bony groping hands" (Tolkien 260). Bilbo becomes a vessel of corruption and a view into the reality of evil. If taken allegorically, this inceptive relationship with evil can be understood as sin. With that, the importance of Christ-like figures in the story is clear. These characters create meaning in the menial conflict of evil within their lives. Tolkien is able to stray from the narrative of an ultimate evil in Sauron and Saruman and reflect on the intimate battles with evil humanity endures.

If Tolkien's life and experiences are taken into account when reading his work, it is clear that Christian traditions and stories made their way into his writing. The clear connection that can be made between his characters and Christ depict an embodiment, or "Christophany" of Christ-like values in the identities of his characters. Frodo, Aragorn, and Gandalf most clearly represent this reflection of values, while Bilbo demonstrates their importance. This is not to say that these characters definitively offer some sort of allegorical reading, however, I believe the ease with which these connections may be made allows for one. Intentionally or not, Tolkien weaves his faith into the fabric of his characters. Though he may not have intended, or even wanted, this work to be read as a Christian allegory, understanding the influence of faith on his life allows for a connection to Christianity to be made.

Resources

R., T. J. R. (2020). *The Fellowship of the Ring*. HarperCollinsPublishers.

R., T. J. R., & Lee, A. (2020). *The Two Towers*. HarperCollinsPublishers.