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Middle Earth's Messianic Mythology Remixed: Gandalf's Death and Resurrection in Novel and Film

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Abstract

In the mythology of the very influential *The Lord of the Rings*, J. R. R. Tolkien employed several Christ figures, the most obvious being the wizard Gandalf. In Tolkien's "fundamentally religious and Catholic" novel, the symbolism of Gandalf's "death and resurrection" scenes was implicit, but Peter Jackson's film versions visually made Gandalf's Christ-figure symbolism more explicit. This article will explore:

- The cultural impact of Tolkien's mythology
- The meaning of myth to Tolkien
- The characteristics of a Christ figure
- What a Christ figure subtext may add to the psychological/mythological impact of a work of art
- How Gandalf's death and resurrection scenes portrayed him as a Christ figure
- How these two scenes in the films diverged from the book
- The possible meaning of that divergence (of the mythology remixed)

Cultural Impact of the Novel and Film

[1] One of the most influential works of literature written in the twentieth century was J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Forty-six years after the novel's initial publication, this appraisal appeared in *The Kansas City Star*: "Tolkien's epic trilogy remains the ultimate quest, the ultimate battle between good and evil. . . . Endlessly imitated, it never has been surpassed." [1] Tolkien's novel, originally published in three volumes (1954 through 1955), is still in print over a half century later and has been translated into at least 38 languages. [2] It has been adapted into other media, such as graphic novels, games, calendars, movies, and even a musical, [3] and it has influenced a generation of sword-and-sorcery and other fantasy novels and games. [4]

[2] Popular interest in Tolkien's work was rekindled in the twenty-first century by Peter Jackson's three film adaptations. [5] Filmed consecutively during 16 months in New Zealand with a 2,400 member crew, the combined trilogy (in terms of shooting schedule, crew size, and overall budget) was "the biggest film undertaking of all time." [6] The three award-winning films are all in the top 11 highest grossing films in history with a combined take in the billions. The films introduced Tolkien's world to multitudes of people who had never read the novel and provided a rich audio-visual banquet to Tolkien's literary fans. [7] In spite of great challenges in adapting Tolkien's text to the screen, the films remained remarkably true to Tolkien's vision. [8] Despite some reservations, literary critic and Tolkien fan Brian Rosebury wrote: "the impressive achievement of Jackson and his team remains the only phenomena [*sic*] in the cultural afterlife of *The Lord of the Rings* that could conceivably threaten to occlude the work itself in our collective awareness. . . . [It] is conceivable that, as generations grow up who have had ready access to both versions from childhood, the film's representations of place, character, incident and theme may be the ones normalized in popular

Adaptation: *The Self-Proclaiming Rhetoric of Charlie Kaufman and of the Apostle Paul*
 - Matthew Anderson,
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consciousness.”[9]

Tolkien and Myth

[3] Tolkien's story has become embedded in popular consciousness, in part, because it is deeply mythical. “Myth” denotes diverse things to different people. To some, myth is only a story that “isn't true.” To others, myth offers meaning for life. “A myth is a way of making sense in a senseless world. Myths are narrative patterns that give significance to our existence,” wrote psychiatrist Rollo May. “Myths are like the beams in a house: not exposed to outside view, they are the structure which holds the house together so people can live in it.”[10] Similarly Frank McConnell wrote, “Dreams are the stories that get us through the night, but myths are the stories that get us through the day.”[11]

[4] The definition, validity, and usefulness of myths has been argued since at least the days of Plato. Anthropologist Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty called Plato “the first great demythologizer [who] ‘deconstructed’ the myths of Homer and Hesiod.”[12] Plato contrasted mere “fabricated myths” with superior “true history.”[13] On the other hand, however, Plato saw value in a “noble lie.” O'Flaherty commented, “People do have to have myths, Plato concedes; if they don't believe in the old ones, we must construct new ones for them. . . . For Plato admits that a myth says something that cannot be said in any other way, that cannot be translated into a logical or even a metaphysical statement. A myth says something that can only be said in a *story*.”[14] Not only will new myths fill a mythological vacuum, but they enhance our lives as O'Flaherty also observed: “New myths move us into new worlds where we can begin to think thoughts that not only were impossible to think within our old familiar world of ideas but that we could not even realize we had been unable to think in that world.”[15]

[5] In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Plato's demythologizing descendants proliferated.[16] Various cultural groups wanting to eliminate myth from life paradoxically consisted of those “who have embraced secular modernity and those who abhor it.”[17] Secular humanists replaced myth and religion with the scientific method. Liberal theologians stripped myth from religious texts while searching for a demythologized historical Jesus. Conservative fundamentalists viewed myths as devilish lies that “constitute dangerous rivals to Christian truth and may lead the unwary astray.”[18] Running counter to these demythologizing currents, Tolkien believed myth had enormous value, and he created his own new myth of Middle Earth.

[6] The ultimate significance of myth to Tolkien was revealed in a conversation with his friend C. S. Lewis. Before Lewis became a famous Christian writer, Lewis was for years an atheist. Part of the process that led to his conversion was a conversation with Tolkien[19] about the truth and/or falsehood of myth. In Humphrey Carpenter's biography of Lewis, which recreated part of that conversation, Lewis loved Norse myths:

But [Lewis] still did not *believe* in the myths that delighted him. Beautiful and moving though such stories might be, they were (he said) ultimately untrue. As he expressed it to Tolkien, myths are ‘lies and therefore worthless, even though breathed through silver’.

No, said Tolkien. *They are not lies.* . . .

[Tolkien continued,] man is not ultimately a liar. He may pervert his thoughts into lies, but he comes from God, and it is from God that he draws his ultimate ideals. . . . Therefore, . . . not merely the abstract thoughts of man *but also his imaginative inventions* must originate with God, and must in consequence reflect something of eternal truth. In making a myth, . . . a storyteller . . . is actually fulfilling God's purpose, and reflecting a splintered fragment of the true light. Pagan myths are therefore never just ‘lies’: there is always something of the truth in them.[20]

[7] Tolkien's “new” myth of Middle Earth had components from many ancient stories. One such component adding a mythic dimension to his story was his use of several Christ figures, characters who in some way parallel the biblical story of Jesus, characters that vividly reflect “a splintered fragment of the true light.” Frodo, Aragorn, and

Gandalf[21] could all be viewed as highlighting different aspects of a Christ figure. Frodo, as suffering servant, figuratively bears the sin of the world on his Via Dolorosa[22] toward Mount Doom. Aragorn, as warrior-king, echoes Revelation's "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" who defeats evil and reigns in a new age of peace and healing of the nations.[23] Gandalf, as prophet, first understands and proclaims the danger of the one ring, helps form and lead the Fellowship, "exorcizes" Saruman (as if he were a New Testament demon) from Théoden, and crowns Aragorn as king.[24] Both Frodo and Aragorn have *symbolic* death and resurrection scenes. Frodo, paralyzed by Shelob's sting and wrapped up in spider-silk grave clothes, is thought to be dead by Sam for a time. In the film, but not the book, Aragorn plunges into a canyon's river during a battle and is presumed lost by his comrades. Eventually Frodo and Aragorn "resurrect" and return as their former selves to the journey. Gandalf, in contrast, *literally* dies and returns transformed. At his return in the film, Gandalf visually bears a striking resonance with popular images of the risen Christ. The strong symbolism of "death and resurrection" scenes makes Gandalf the most obvious Christ figure of the three characters.

Christ Figure Codes

[8] Christ figures have appeared in many works of literature and film, but how exactly do we recognize one? A Christ figure is a character who symbolizes Christ in a significant way. Spiritual symbolism has a long history. One of the earliest symbolic representations or veiled iconographic references to Jesus in the early centuries of the church was the use of the *ichthus* (or *ichthys*[25]) fish symbol. With Christianity outlawed in the Roman Empire and persecutions spilling the blood of martyrs, Christian groups gathered covertly. According to tradition, Christians adopted a symbolic "secret code" to recognize one another and to guide followers to the changing meeting locations.[26] This symbol consisted of two intersecting arcs that resembled a stylized profile of a fish. The symbol was easily created and was appropriate because of several associations of fish with Jesus (from the feeding of thousands through loaf and fish multiplication[27] to miraculous catches[28] to Jesus calling his disciples to leave their nets and become "fishers of men").[29] What became the most important coincidental connotation, however, was that the Greek word for fish, *ichthus*, also formed an acronym for *Iesous Christos Theou Uios Soter* or "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior." This correspondence ensured its popularity because it "held for Christians a meaning of the highest significance; it was a brief profession of faith in the divinity of Christ." [30] After the fourth century, the symbolism of the fish seemed to wane,[31] but in the late twentieth century, this symbol resurged and became popularly known as the "Jesus fish" and has been used on diverse media (from jewelry to business cards to bumper stickers) and for diverse purposes (from adornment to identification to proclamation to parody).[32]

[9] In the time of the early church, the *ichthus* was an icon hiding in plain sight for all to see. The *ichthus* was mere scratches in sand or stone for some, but the pattern of two simple interconnected curved lines held profound significance for those who understood the meaning of the sign. That interpretive dichotomy exists for Christ figures in films today. What may be only celluloid "scratches" for many moviegoers may be metaphors of profound importance for those who see and appreciate the meaning behind the pattern. The ability to "decode" the symbolism adds new dimensions to a piece of art. Partial decoding may occur on an unconscious level. For Christ figures, such themes as sacrifice, suffering, death, resurrection, and salvation are powerful on any level of understanding. Bringing the complete "decoded" message to consciousness, however, reveals fuller meaning in a story.

[10] The *ichthus* symbol on a surface visual level is just two curved lines, but on another level the meaning behind the pattern forms a "holy subtext." [33] In movies or novels, any subtext is a "covert storyline" that is a part of the overt plot (the text). Like a Russian Matryoshka nesting doll that opens up to reveal a smaller doll inside, the subtext lies within the text.[34] Opening up the text to find the subtext (whether "secular" or "holy") brings new meaning to the film experience. In particular, a *holy* subtext consists of "anonymous religiousness"[35] or "overtly religious themes in a secular 'wrapper.'" [36] With such subtexts, Anton Karl Kozlovic noted, "secular films can engage in religious storytelling about biblical characters, ideas and themes without

appearing 'religious.' In fact, innumerable Christ-figures and other holy subtexts are hidden within the popular cinema." [37] With various intents, holy subtexts containing increasingly complex Christ-figure "codes" have been used in art and literature across the millennia. In the twentieth century, movies became one of the world's dominant transmitters of art and literature. (Films are currently rivaled only by television programming in this sense, but with easy access through cable, satellite dishes, and DVDs, many people see more movies on their home television sets than in theatres.) Movies with holy subtexts may provide for many people (especially those attending few if any church services) their greatest exposure to Christology.

[11] "Christ" and "Messiah" are essentially interchangeable in the New Testament since the Greek "Christ" and Hebrew "Messiah" both mean "Anointed One" after the practice of anointing kings. Messianic concepts varied widely in biblical times, but in general, people expected the Messiah to be a king, saviour, and redeemer. Today, "Christ" is more narrowly denoted than "Messiah." A "messiah" can generally refer to any saviour figure, but "Christ" refers more specifically to Jesus' identity and mission.

[12] Without some analysis of what a Christ figure is, some viewers may remain oblivious to all messianic movie metaphors, while other viewers with opposite proclivities may strive to see Christ figures everywhere. Anton Karl Kozlovic noted: "Christ-figures are built into many popular films . . . , but they are frequently ignored by critics, unappreciated by film fans, or resisted by anti-religionists. Conversely, believers sometimes want to see them where none credibly exist, thus religiously distorting their reading of the films. So, what can be legitimately called a cinematic Christ-figure?" [38] Kozlovic proposed 25 structural characteristics [39] of a cinematic Christ figure, although not all 25 may be found in a particular character. I offer below a different, more compressed schema relevant to the character of Gandalf.

[13] To truly be considered a Christ figure in a film, the character's resemblance to Jesus, as Peter Malone suggested, "needs to be significant and substantial, otherwise it is trivial." [40] Also, the symbolism "needs to be understood from the text and texture of the work of art, be it classical or popular, and not read into the text with Christian presuppositions." [41] To be considered a Christ figure in a film, the protagonist must show a significant number of analogies to the life and work of Jesus. In the scenes from *The Lord of the Rings* considered here, Gandalf has the following analogous traits:

- Comes from an extraordinary origin [42]
- Possesses a "secret identity" and dual nature [43]
- Displays a distinctive appearance [44]
- Exhibits extraordinary powers [45]
- Generates awe and wonder [46]
- Gathers and leads disciples [47]
- Saves others [48]
- Suffers a sacrificial death [49]
- Descends into "hell" [50]
- Rises from the dead [51]

These items will be discussed more in their contexts below.

Tolkien Intensified

[14] In Tolkien's novel, the symbolism of Gandalf's death and resurrections scenes was implicit, but (as will be demonstrated) Peter Jackson's films visually enhanced the Christ-figure symbolism [52] surrounding Gandalf to a more explicit level. Although the more explicit symbolism concerning Gandalf is just one example of differences in details between the novel and the films, overall the films were remarkably faithful in spirit to the novel. In adapting a thousand-page novel for film, director Peter Jackson, [53] his screenwriters, film editors, and others had to make many choices about what to condense, eliminate, rearrange, and—in some cases—add. [54] In the case of Gandalf's death and resurrection scenes, the scenes seemed true to the spirit of the novel, but several details were visually added that enhanced the religious symbolism.

[15] Religious symbolism permeates the novels. [55] Tolkien stated that his text was "a

fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision.”[56] Matthew Dickerson commented on Tolkien’s description: “According to Tolkien himself, his trilogy is not merely peripherally Christian, but fundamentally so. Not only fundamentally so, but consciously so. Indeed, this seems so obvious to the author that he can only say ‘of course’ to the suggestion. All that he knows—and thus all that he is able to put into his stories—has been nourished by his Christian faith.”[57]

[16] Acknowledging Tolkien’s religious themes, Jackson said: “I’m not a Catholic, so I didn’t put any of that personally into the film on my behalf, but I certainly am aware that there were certain [religious] things that Tolkien was thinking of. . . . We made a real decision at the beginning that we weren’t going to introduce any new themes of our own into *The Lord of the Rings*. We were just going to make a film based upon what clearly Tolkien was passionate about.”[58]

[17] Although Jackson said that he is *not* Catholic, he seemingly has made no overt statement of what his religious beliefs *are*. Jackson’s films prior to *The Lord of the Rings*, including a blood-and-gore “splatter” film, did not give the impression that Jackson is a man who deeply treasures conventional spirituality. However, David Bruce, webmaster of *HollywoodJesus.com*, said Jackson’s creativeness is “tied to his spirituality. A theologian he is not. However, he knows how to intrinsically connect stories to the deep inner spiritual longings and sensibilities of people worldwide.”[59]

[18] Why Jackson (and his production crew)[60] intensified Tolkien’s religious symbolism is unclear. Some of it (particularly Gandalf’s “glowing” scenes) may have been from a desire by Jackson and the special effects team to maximize the visual spectacle, but spectacle enhancement does not necessarily mean additional spiritual symbolism.[61] Perhaps, like Tolkien, Jackson intensified the symbolism “unconsciously so at first” since the key points of Christ’s passion are well known in our culture (whether believed or not) and have been used consciously or unconsciously by many other authors and directors. Knowing Jackson’s unidentified reasons are not essential to this analysis, however, because, as R. J. Reilly said, “The aim of the critic . . . is to show what the artist did, whether the artist meant to do it or not.”[62]

Gandalf’s Death and Resurrection

[19] In the first movie of Jackson’s trilogy, the group known as the Fellowship of the Ring (consisting of hobbits, men, an elf, a dwarf, and a wizard) and led by Gandalf (Ian McKellen) embark on a quest to destroy Sauron’s ring of power in the fires of Mount Doom. Joseph Pearce wrote, “At its most profound level, *The Lord of the Rings* is a sublimely mystical passion play. The carrying of the ring—the emblem of sin—is the carrying of the cross.”[63] The ring of power borne by Frodo (Elijah Wood) is a symbol of evil, sin, temptation, and the Fall.[64]

[20] While traveling through the Mines of Moria, the Fellowship is surrounded by orcs, but the orcs suddenly flee at the sound of an ominous, thundering growl. Boromir (Sean Bean) asks Gandalf, “What is this new devilry?” (“Devilry” is a particularly apt word choice, and it is not in the book.) Gandalf senses the still unseen threat[65] and replies, “A Balrog, a demon of the ancient world. This foe is beyond any of you. Run!” He does not say, “This foe is beyond any of *us*,” because Gandalf realizes that only he can stop the Balrog. The Balrog’s visual description in the novel is somewhat vague and left for the imagination to fill in, but in the film, the flaming, horned, hooved monster clearly resembles popular depictions of Satan.

[21] They flee across the Bridge of Khazad-dûm. Gandalf, however, who has commanded Aragorn (Viggo Mortensen) to lead the group on, deliberately begins crossing last, stops in the middle of the span, and turns to face the Balrog. In the movie’s confrontation, his staff glows brightly, producing a halo of light surrounding him. The book does not describe such a halo at that point, but through the centuries, popular art has often shown Jesus with a halo of light around his head and sometimes around his entire body.

[22] Standing before the Balrog, Gandalf reveals hints of his true identity, saying, “I am a servant of the Secret Fire, wielder of the flame of Anor.” Bradley J. Birzer noted, “As

Tolkien admitted . . . the 'Secret Fire,' Gandalf's master is the Holy Spirit." [66] The Holy Spirit, of course, is known as part of the Trinity with God the Son.

[23] Gandalf appears as a man, but he is more than a man. He is a wizard of the race of Ainur. Tolkien said about Gandalf in a letter, "There are naturally no precise modern terms to say what he was. I [would] venture to say that he was an *incarnate* 'angel'. . . . By 'incarnate' I mean [Gandalf and the other wizards] were embodied in physical bodies capable of pain, and weariness, and of afflicting the spirit with physical fear, and of being 'killed', though supported by the angelic spirit they might endure long, and only show slowly the wearing of care and labour." [67] Incarnated to appear as a man, Gandalf is not quite immortal since he can—and later does—die as a result of violence.

[24] Gandalf uses his staff to crack the bridge, the bridge crumbles under the Balrog's feet, and the Balrog plunges into the abyss. The Balrog's fiery whip, however, curls up and around Gandalf's legs, pulling him over the edge of the broken bridge. In the movie, Gandalf momentarily clings to the edge. He says, "Fly, you fools." Then he deliberately lets go and falls. [68] By contrast, in the novel, Gandalf "grasped vainly at the stone, and slid into the abyss." [69] No clinging to the edge of the broken bridge is mentioned, and no choice is implied. He simply falls because he does not seem to have the power to overcome the demon's actions. Gandalf's fall as described in the book seems to be at the time only a tragic accident—certainly not deliberate. (However, in context with the rest of the book, a sacrifice is still implied, such as in a later scene when Galadriel says concerning Gandalf's fall, "Needless were none of the deeds of Gandalf in life." [70]) Thus, the movie version enhances Gandalf's power during the confrontation with the Balrog and introduces an element of choice in Gandalf's fall. Choosing what seems to be certain death in the process of saving the lives of others, moreover, recalls the willing choice Jesus made to journey to Jerusalem during Passover to be crucified for the salvation of the world. [71]

[25] In the movie, as Gandalf falls, his legs are together, and he extends his arms into a perfect cruciform position. Again, this is not described in the novel. The symbolic representation of the cross has, for centuries, been an obvious "code" for the passion, sacrifice, and crucifixion of Christ. The cruciform position combined with the (seconds earlier) deliberate choice in the fall (and apparent death) "decodes" as a deliberately chosen crucifixion, an overt reference to Christ.

[26] Gandalf seems lost forever, and the rest of the Fellowship emerge from the cavern grieving and discouraged. (One can imagine that Jesus' disciples felt much the same way after his crucifixion.) This apparent catastrophe, however, will lead up to a later example of Tolkien's "eucatastrophe" [72] ("good catastrophe" or the sudden joyous triumph of good in the face of defeat). Despite appearances, all is not lost. Good will later come out of this ostensible disaster.

[27] Gandalf's true fate is later revealed in *The Two Towers* through a flashback, and the viewers begin to understand the reasons behind his sacrificial choice. During Gandalf's plunge into the abyss, he battles the satanic Balrog. This descent seems reminiscent of the enigmatic but popular tradition of Jesus "descending into hell." The phrase "he descended into hell" found in the Apostles' Creed (although not in the earliest versions) has been dropped by some denominations from liturgical use because of its problematic scriptural support. [73] Interpretation of this phrase is also troublesome, but commonly held to mean Jesus, during the interim of his death and resurrection, preached to the souls of people who had already died, proclaimed freedom to them, and/or liberated them from their infernal bondage. [74]

[28] In the movie, although no "lost souls" are connected to Gandalf in this scene, [75] Gandalf is locked in long combat with a fire demon, and that scene visually evokes many associations with popular depictions of Satan and the underworld. [76] If Gandalf had not chosen to engage in this final battle with the Balrog, perhaps the fate of the quest would have been different. If Gandalf had climbed over the edge of the bridge, perhaps the Balrog would have later emerged from the caves and pursued the Fellowship. Gandalf made it clear that the rest of the Fellowship had no weapons that were effective against it. Perhaps a second encounter would have claimed more lives. If so, then Gandalf's

descent did save “souls.”

[29] More than that, if the Balrog had killed them all, the quest to destroy the ring of power would have ended there. The ring presumably would have eventually made it back to Sauron. Or perhaps the Balrog would have claimed it and used it with terrible consequences. Either way, Middle Earth may then have been doomed. Thus, in just this one act, Gandalf may have saved the rest of the Fellowship as well as all of Middle Earth.

[30] After the descent, the Balrog and Gandalf later ascend to “the highest peak” (that reaches toward heaven). There the Balrog is finally defeated and falls to the slopes far below as lightning flashes in the background sky.[77] With the religious symbolism of earlier scenes as a background, this scene seems to recall Jesus’ words, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.”[78]

[31] Gandalf then falls exhausted and “dies.” He later describes what happens: “Darkness took me, and I strayed out of thought and time. Stars wheeled overhead, and every day was as long as a life age of the Earth. But it was not the end. I felt life in me again. I’ve been sent back until my task is done.”[79]

[32] Gandalf’s resurrection is atypical in one aspect compared to other Christ figures. When Christ figures rise from the dead,[80] their resurrections usually occur near the climax of their stories. Gandalf’s resurrection, however, occurs slightly before the midpoint of the entire story.[81] Many events happen after Gandalf’s appearance, and this distance removes it from a direct relationship with the “final solution” of the story and dims it in the mind of the viewer/reader. Nevertheless, it is a profound moment in the story, and had Gandalf not returned to continue his task, the quest would surely have ultimately failed.

[33] Later, Gandalf appears to Aragorn, Legolas (Orlando Bloom), and Gimli (John Rhys-Davies). They do not recognize him at first because he is clothed and surrounded by blinding light (not in the book).[82] Like Mary Magdalene, who confuses the risen Jesus with a gardener, they initially suppose Gandalf to be someone else.[83] This scene is also reminiscent of the Transfiguration, in which Jesus’ appearance is transformed before three disciples. During the Transfiguration, Jesus’ clothing became as “bright as a flash of lightning.”[84] Christian art has often visualized Jesus in a fluorescent white robe. Although Jesus appeared as “just” a man throughout most of his life, glimpses of his true identity emerged at the Transfiguration and after his resurrection. Jesus’ post-resurrection appearance was somehow different than before his death. His transformed form was not always recognized by his followers, and he manifested different new abilities.[85] Like Jesus, Gandalf was also transformed. Sean McGrath wrote that “the transformation from a tiny seed into a stalk of golden wheat has a price: annihilation. Annihilation of our present state of existence is the condition of the possibility of transformation. . . . The wizard Gandalf’s death and resurrection is the supreme enactment of this drama of surrender, annihilation, and transformation.”[86]

[34] After finally recognizing Gandalf’s transformed identity, Legolas[87] kneels (not in the book) and Gimli bows before him. Aragorn does not bow or kneel, but he looks at Gandalf with stunned wonder. These three members (disciples) of the Fellowship (that Gandalf led and helped form) look in awe at their master. Gandalf’s white hair, beard, and clothing—as well as the reactions of Legolas and Gimli—are also reminiscent of the apocalyptic vision to John of Jesus in Revelation 1:14-17: “His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like a blazing fire. . . . When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.”

[35] Gandalf the Grey had the power to defeat the Balrog before his death, and as the resurrected Gandalf the White, his powers are shown more explicitly during the rest of the story.[88] Although most viewers of the films would likely not notice all this symbolism, Gandalf’s death and resurrection scenes are clearly messianic metaphors that add an additional spiritual dimension to the mythology of *The Lord of the Rings*.

[36] After publication, Tolkien thought his book’s description of the return of Gandalf was a “defect.” He explained that Gandalf “must return at that point, and such explanations of his survival as are explicitly set out must be given there—but the

narrative is urgent, and must not be held up for elaborate discussions involving the whole 'mythological' setting. It is a little impeded even so, though I have severely cut [Gandalf's] account of himself. . . . I have purposely kept all allusions to the highest matters down to mere hints, perceptible only by the most attentive, or kept them under unexplained symbolic forms." [89] The visual nature of film can often compress information into a scene equivalent to many scattered pages of text, and Jackson "encoded" more Christ figure imagery into his scenes than Tolkien's "severely cut" account. Since Jackson's films visually amplified Tolkien's Christological association in Gandalf's death and resurrection scenes, Jackson's cinematic presentations of Gandalf as a Christ figure may have communicated more fully the vision of what Tolkien had intended all along.

Gandalf, Myth, and Meaning

[37] Tolkien's "thoroughly Catholic" mythology became more accessible to millions through Jackson's movies. Concerning movies and religious myths, M. Darrol Bryant wrote:

Cinema is a form of popular "religion." As a popular form of the religious life, movies do what we have always asked of popular religion, namely, they provide us with archetypal forms of humanity—heroic figures—and instruct us in the basic values and myths of our society. As we watch the characters and follow the drama on the screen, we are instructed in the values and myths of our culture and given models on which to pattern our lives. [90]

[38] Our lives are influenced by memorable mythology. Karen Armstrong wrote, "Mythology . . . is an art form. Any powerful work of art invades our being and changes it forever." [91] Furthermore, the "myth of the hero was not intended to provide us with icons to admire, but was designed to tap into the vein of heroism within ourselves. Myth must lead to imitation or participation, not passive contemplation." [92]

[39] Tolkien and Jackson both portrayed Gandalf in these scenes as a heroic, exemplary being who willingly accepts self-sacrifice, who "loses his life" for others, who brings hope in the midst of despair, and who transforms apparent catastrophe into eucatastrophe. Although Gandalf is only one strand of the complex mythology composing *The Lord of the Rings*, Jackson's remixed Middle Earth messiah added to the psychological impact of the immensely popular films and helped perpetuate a timeless myth that still resonates with audiences of the twenty-first century.

Notes

[1] John Mark Eberhart and Matthew Schofield, "After half a century, The Lord of the Rings towers over fantasy fiction—and now the films loom," *The Kansas City Star*, 1 October 2000: J1.

[2] Page references in this article are to the one-volume edition of J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994). (Tolkien did not like having his novel split into three separate books by the publisher.)

[3] Performances of the world premiere musical/play/spectacle debuted in March 2006 in Toronto, Canada. See "Lord of the Rings' musical opens in Toronto," *CBC.CA*, 23 March 2006, 23 April 7 2006. <<http://www.cbc.ca/story/arts/national/2006/03/23/lordoftherings-musical.html>>, Jeff Lunden, "Lord of the Rings' Takes the Stage," *NPR*, 17 March 2006, 25 March 2006 <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5285362>>, and *The Lord of the Rings—Onstage* 2006, 25 March 2006 <<http://www.lotr.com/>>.

[4] Brian Rosebury noted that J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* "stories have triumphed by fusing elements reminiscent of Tolkien with a wholly different . . . genre, the public-school story." Brian Rosebury, *Tolkien: A Cultural Phenomenon*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 204.

[5]Film references are to *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring (Special Extended Edition DVD)*, dir. Peter Jackson, New Line Home Entertainment, 2002, and *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers (Special Extended Edition DVD)*, dir. Peter Jackson, New Line New Line Home Entertainment, 2003.

[6]Ethan Gilsdorf, "Lord of the Gold Ring," *The Boston Globe*, 16 November 2003, 8 March 2006 <http://www.boston.com/news/globe/magazine/articles/2003/11/16/lord_of_the_gold_ring/>.

[7]Gilsdorf wrote that the "ranks of movie-driven enthusiasts have multiplied like Saruman's orcs."

[8]Rosebury wrote, "Many had feared, if not *Conan the Barbarian* with hobbits, at any rate a degree of assimilation to other Hollywood or sub-Hollywood genres. . . . Images of a wisecracking, eyebrow-raising Aragorn and a 'feisty', kick-boxing Arwen shoving Orcs over precipices in between their love scenes have happily been dispelled" (210).

[9]Rosebury, 219-220.

[10]Rollo May, *The Cry for Myth* (1991; New York: Delta, 1992), 15.

[11]Frank McConnell, "'Live Long & Prosper': The 'Trek' Goes On," *Commonweal* 118 (November 8, 1991): 652.

[12]Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Other People's Myths* (New York: Macmillan, 1988), 26.

[13]O'Flaherty, 25.

[14]O'Flaherty, 26-27.

[15]O'Flaherty, 165-166.

[16]However, secular mythologies that operated on an unconscious level in the United States were analyzed in John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) and Richard T. Hughes, *Myths America Lives By* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003). In spite of conscious rejection of older "myths," throughout American history unconscious secular mythologies have been alive and well. Some examples are the myth of America as a chosen and innocent nation and the myth of redemptive violence as personified by the Wild West gunslinger who rescues the community from evil.

[17]Bradley J. Birzer, *J. R. R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2003), xxii.

[18]Birzer, xxii.

[19]Hugo Dyson was also a participant in the conversation.

[20]Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979), 43.

[21]Matthew T. Dickerson even saw Boromir as a possible Christ figure in *Following Gandalf* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003), 210.

[22]Steven D. Greydanus, "Faith and Fantasy: Tolkien the Catholic," *The Lord of the Rings*, and Peter Jackson's film trilogy," *Decent Films* 2002, 2 July 2005 <<http://www.decentfilms.com/commentary/faithandfantasy.html>>.

[23]Rev 19:11-16; 21:1-5; 22:1-2.

[24]Compare with Samuel, who after leading Israel for many years, anoints Saul as Israel's first king (1 Sam 10).

[25]Sometimes also transliterated as *ikhthus*.

[26]"Ichthys," *Wikipedia*, 16 February 2006, 6 March 2006 <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ichthys>>.

[27]Matt 14:15-21; Luke 9:12-17; John 6:5-13.

[28]Luke 5:1-11; John 21:1-14.

[29]Matt 4:18-19; Mark 1:16-17.

[30]Maurice M. Hassett, "Symbolism of the Fish," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* 2003, 5 March 2006 <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06083a.htm>>.

[31]Hassett.

[32]As its usage went from furtive to fashionable, the *ichthus* symbol underwent transformation. The classic "Jesus" fish symbol's meaning changed from covert to overt, its original mythic significance became cheapened and demythologized, and its prevalence provoked burlesque parodies (such as the legs-sprouting "Darwin fish," flaming "Satan fish," and other variations). Variations even include a remythologized "Truth" fish eating a "Darwin" fish.

[33]Anton Karl Kozlovic, "The Structural Characteristics of the Cinematic Christ-figure," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 8 (Fall 2004), <<http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art8-cinematicchrist.html>>, ¶ 4.

[34]As one of the most complex movie examples, *The Matrix* trilogy contained multiple layered syncretistic subtexts that related to philosophy, religion, science fiction literature, action films, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, and the mythic hero's journey as described by Joseph Campbell. See Mark D. Stucky, "He is the One: *The Matrix* Trilogy's Postmodern Movie Messiah," *The Journal of Religion and Film* 9,2 (Oct. 2005), <<http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Vol9No2/StuckyMatrixMessiah.htm>>.

[35]Michael Paul Gallagher, "Theology, Discernment and Cinema," *New Image of Religious Film*, ed. John R. May (Franklin: Sheed & Ward, 1997), 151.

[36]Robert Ellis, "Movies and Meaning," *Expository Times* 112,9 (June 2001): 304.

[37]Kozlovic, ¶ 5.

[38]Kozlovic, ¶ Abstract.

[39]The characteristics (¶ 20-68) were: tangible, central, outsiders, divinely sourced and tasked, alter egos, special normal, twelve associates, the holy age, a betrayer associate, a sexually identified woman, a pointing prophet and baptism rites, a decisive death and resurrection, triumphalism, service to "lesser," a willing sacrifice, innocent, a cruciform pose, cross associations, miracles and signs, simplicity, poverty, Jesus' garb: physical and spiritual, blue eyes, holy exclamations, and J.C. initials and "Chris" referents. Kozlovic's list included some characteristics that are extremely significant (decisive death and resurrection), some that overlap (tangible and central), and some that are trivial (blue eyes).

[40]Peter Malone, "Edward Scissorhands: Christology from a Suburban Fairy-tale," *Explorations in Theology and Film*, eds. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2000). 76.

[41]Mallone, 76.

[42]The Bible claims Jesus is the only Son of God, God Incarnate, who left heavenly glory and took on lowly human flesh in the form of an infant in Bethlehem (Luke 1-2; John 1, 8:58; Heb 1-2).

[43]Jesus' true, hidden identity was crucial. He was more than he outwardly appeared, more than just a man. Metaphorically, Jesus was God "disguised" in human form. A baby in a manger was hardly recognizable as the second person of the Trinity. During his ministry, Jesus never called himself "the Messiah." His favorite term for himself was the enigmatic "Son of Man." His own disciples only partly understood his identity. On numerous occasions, he told people and even demons not to tell others about his miracles or about his identity. (See Mark 1:23-34; 5:39-43; Matt 9:29-31; 16:13-20; Phil 2:6-8.) Explanations for this "messianic secret" have been debated among theologians for over a century. For an overview, see John Depoe, "The Messianic Secret

in the Gospel of Mark: Historical Development and Value of Wrede's Theory,"

Johndepoe.com 16 April 2002, 15 October 2005.

<http://www.johndepoe.com/Messianic_secret.pdf>.

[44]Paradoxically, along with a "secret" identity, glimpses of his "true" identity emerged at times when Jesus took on a distinctly different appearance from those around him, such as at the Transfiguration (Luke 9:29; Mark 9:3).

[45]Jesus performed many miracles such as feeding thousands of people from a handful of loaves, walking on the water, calming a storm, casting out demons, healing various illnesses, and, ultimately, rising from the dead (Mark 4:35-5:43; 6:30-56).

[46]Jesus' miracles, teachings, and sometimes his presence alone astonished the people (Matt 15:29-31; 22:22, 33; Mark 2:12; 7:37; Luke 5:1-11; John 18:5-6; 24-29).

[47]Jesus called 12 disciples/apostles and had other followers as well. These he trained and gave certain powers and authority (Matt 10; Mark 1:14-20; John 10:1).

[48]Jesus' purpose for taking on human flesh was to rescue humanity from sin and death, to reconcile people with God and with each other, and to triumph over evil (Rom 5; Luke 2:11; Matt 7:15-23; 13:24-30; 25:31-46; Eph 6:10-18; 1 Cor 15).

[49]Jesus willingly allowed himself to be persecuted, mocked, tortured, and crucified to complete his work of salvation (Matt. 16:21; 20:28; 27:45-54; Rom 5).

[50]This problematic but popular motif is derived from 1 Pet 3:19, 4:6; Eph 4:9; Acts 2:23-32; Matt 12:39-40.

[51]On the third day, Jesus resurrected, exited the tomb, and appeared to various followers in subsequent days (Luke 24; John 20; 1 Cor 15).

[52]But not to the level of allegory, which Tolkien thoroughly disliked (Tolkien, xvii).

[53]The common view that directors are the "authors" of films is often somewhat simplistic since making movies is a complex collaboration. Directors may play the premier role in shaping the end results, but the screenwriters, editors, actors, computer animators, and others also contribute key elements in developing the final screen product. For just one documented example of how much this collaboration may matter on the subject of Christ figures, in the classic 1951 *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, the screenwriter, Edmund H. North, sneaked Christ figure symbolism into the script. North had Klaatu, the alien, come down out of the heavens in glowing splendor, take on the name Carpenter as he went about incognito on Earth, suffer persecution and execution, resurrect from the dead, and finally ascend back into the heavens—yet all this rather blatant symbolism went unnoticed by the director and producer at the time. North later admitted: "I never discussed it with [producer Julian] Blaustein or [director Robert] Wise because I didn't want it expressed. I had originally hoped that the Christ comparison would be subliminal." Quoted in Kenneth Von Gunden and Stuart H. Stock, *Twenty All-Time Great Science Fiction Films* (New York: Arlington House, 1982), 44.

[54]For more information about the translation of the novel into the film, see Jeffrey Mallinson, "A Potion too Strong?: Challenges in Translating the Religious Significance of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* to Film," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 1 (Spring 2002), <<http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/article-tolkien.html>>, Christopher Garbowski, "Life as a Journey: The Spiritual Dimension in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings*," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 6 (Spring 2004), <<http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art6-lifejourney.html>>, and Greg Wright, *Peter Jackson in Perspective* (Burien, WA: Hollywood Jesus Books, 2004).

[55]But not to the level of allegory, which, as noted earlier, Tolkien thoroughly disliked (Tolkien, xvii).

[56]Humphrey Carpenter, ed., *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981), 172.

[57]Dickerson, 218.

[58]Quoted in Steven D. Greydanus, "The Return of the King: Filmmakers contemplate journey, significance of books and films," *Decent Films* 2003, <http://www.decentfilms.com/commentary/lotr_junket.html>. Rosebury attributed the faithfulness to Tolkien not only to Jackson's vision but also to the many readers of Tolkien among the crew that could provide "the huge production company with a critical mass of sympathy and understanding of the book" (210). More recently, Jackson also showed great reverence for the 1933 source material in his remake of *King Kong* (Universal, 2005). Jackson's basic story outline remains true to the original (even keeping the setting in the 1930s instead of modernizing it as John Guillermin's 1976 remake did). Jackson, however, added his own flourishes such as amplifying the audio-visual spectacle and enhancing the love story between the blonde beauty and the very tall, dark, but not-so-beastly star. Although generally reverential to the original, for our current politically correct sensibilities, Jackson also critiqued the craven and tragic exploitation of Kong.

[59]Quoted in Wright, 2.

[60]See n. 53 above on directors as authors.

[61]Jackson certainly maximized the spectacle in his 2005 remake of *King Kong*. Besides the state-of-the-art animation, as just one example, Jackson did not merely imitate the 1933 version's battle between Kong and *one* Tyrannosaurus. Instead, Jackson's Kong fights *three* at once, part of the time while suspended in midair by vines.

[62]Quoted in Gracia Fay Ellwood, *Good News from Tolkien's Middle Earth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), 88.

[63]Joseph Pearce, "Why Tolkien Says *The Lord of the Rings* Is Catholic," *Catholic Educator's Resource Center*, 12-19 January 2003, <<http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/arts/al0161.html>>. More conservatively, Richard Purtill wrote, "Frodo is not Christ, the Ring is not the Cross, and the salvation his sacrifice wins is a purely secular salvation. But there are obviously echoes of these greater realities in the fictional 'Passion' of Frodo." Richard Purtill, "Christian Morality in *The Lord of the Rings*," *Readings on J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Katie de Koster, The Greenhaven Press Literary Companion to British Authors (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 2000). 90-91.

[64]According to Pearce, the Fall can be viewed as "the one sin to rule them all . . . and in the darkness bind them."

[65]In the book (Tolkien, 321), Legolas, not Gandalf, is the first to see what it is. Thus, the film intensified Gandalf's "prophetic" power.

[66]Birzer, 62.

[67]Carpenter, 202.

[68]This visual observation is confirmed by Peter Jackson, Fran Walsh, and Philippa Boyers in "The Director and Writers" audio commentary for that scene on the DVD.

[69]Tolkien, 322.

[70]Tolkien, 347. In one of his letters, Tolkien says about Gandalf: "it was for him a sacrifice to perish on the Bridge in defence of his companions" (Carpenter, 202).

[71]Matt 16:21; 20:28; 27:45-54; John 10:17-18; Rom 5.

[72]"On Fairy Stories," *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), 81.

[73]1 Pet 3:19, 4:6; Eph 4:9; Acts 2:23-32; Matt 12:39-40.

[74]If the supporting biblical texts were sparse and cryptic, various apocryphal stories elaborated the alleged details. See, for example, Alice K. Turner, *The History of Hell* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993), 66-70.

[75]That role more obviously belongs to Aragorn who later frees the lost cursed souls residing in the Paths of the Dead after the ghosts are able to fulfill their previously broken oath to Isildur by helping Aragorn in battle.

[76]Some theories of atonement view salvation coming to humanity as a result of Jesus defeating Satan (Turner, 68).

[77]The lightning also electrifies Gandalf's sword just before the killing stroke to the Balrog.

[78]Luke 10:18; cf. Isa 14:12-14.

[79]The concept in the novel (Tolkien, 491) is equivalent, but the words there are more condensed.

[80]For example, the protagonists of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *E. T.*, and *The Matrix* all resurrect from the dead just a few scenes from the end of the movie.

[81]Over 500 pages remain in the novel before the end.

[82]In the film, the confusion is compounded because Gandalf's voice is mixed with Saruman's voice (according to "The Director and Writers" audio commentary on the DVD for that scene). Saruman (Christopher Lee) is the wizard they first think the White Wizard is, and, of course, they also think Gandalf is lost forever.

[83]John 20:10-16. Noted in Steven D. Greydanus, "Faith and Fantasy: Tolkien the Catholic, *The Lord of the Rings*, and Peter Jackson's film trilogy," *Decent Films* 2002 <<http://www.decentfilms.com/commentary/faithandfantasy.html>>.

[84]Luke 9:29; Mark 9:3.

[85]Luke 24:13-36; John 20:10-21:7. Also, in the visions of Revelation (1:13-18; 19:11-16), Jesus is pictured in symbolic transcendent terms.

[86]"The Passion According to Tolkien," *Tolkien: A Celebration*, ed. Joseph Pearce (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 173, 178.

[87]In the book (Tolkien, 484), Gimli alone falls to his knees. Here again Jackson has amplified the awe surrounding the risen Gandalf.

[88]As an example, in the resurrection encounter, surrounded by blinding light, he easily fends off Legolas' arrow and Gimli's axe and causes Aragorn's sword to blaze with fire. Soon after that, he dramatically "exorcizes" Saruman from Théoden, King of Rohan.

[89]Carpenter, 201.

[90]Darroll Bryant, "Cinema, Religion, and Popular Culture" *Religion in Film*, eds. John May and Michael Bird (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 106.

[91]Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth* (New York: Canongate, 2005). 148.

[92]Armstrong, 135.

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