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Missing Person

Verlyn Flieger

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Missing Person

Abstract

Notes that while Arda has parallels to many events of the Judeo-Christian story—God, angels, Satan—it lacks a complete parallel to Christ. It has a number of saviors (Gandalf, Aragorn) but no Redeemer, though Frodo comes closest.

Additional Keywords

The Fall in J.R.R. Tolkien; Jesus Christ in literature; Redemption in J.R.R. Tolkien; Saviors in J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Aragorn; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Frodo; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Gandalf

Missing Person

Verlyn Flieger

While the fictive mythology of J.R.R. Tolkien, especially The Lord of the Rings, owes a clear debt to Celtic and Germanic myth and fairy tale, the publication of The Silmarillion and Unfinished Tales makes increasingly plain the Christian basis of his work. His mythic cosmos has a God (Eru/Iluvatar), angels (the Valar), a Satan (Melkor/Morgoth) and the traditional Christian elements of temptation, transgression, sin and salvation. One important element, however, is missing -- the chief actor in the drama and the central event in the myth. There is no Christ. And therefore, there is no single moment when his history turns a corner, no one act which makes everything which comes after different from what came before. I have said there is salvation, but a necessary distinction must be made here between salvation and redemption, between a savior and a redeemer. For while Tolkien's myth has a number of saviours, it has no one redeemer. Redeem, according to The American Heritage Dictionary [1] comes from Latin redimere, "to buy back," that is, to regain, by paying a price, what has been lost or sold. Save, from Latin salvare, salvus, "safe," means "to rescue from harm, to bring to a safe condition." There are a number of saviour-figures in Tolkien's work, who rescue or make safe their world or their companions, but there is no one character who buys back for all time what has been lost.

This is deliberate. Tolkien's stated intention was to omit from his work any overt reference to religion or religious practices in his imaginary world. [2] For he said: "Myth and fairy-story must, as all art, reflect and contain in solution elements of moral and religious truth (or error), but not explicit, not in the known form of the primary 'real' world." (TLOT, p. 172).

To point up the effect of this omission, let me contrast Tolkien with someone to whom he is often compared, C.S. Lewis. Lewis and Tolkien -- friends, fellow-Christians, writers of mythic fantasy -- approach the question of religious reference in their fiction differently, and the difference is characteristic of each. Two of Lewis's mythological fantasies, The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, and Perelandra, have -- each in its own way -- a central event which is consciously and deliberately modeled on Christianity. In The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, the lion, Aslan, sacrifices himself by offering to die in the place of Edmund, a sinning mortal enticed into evil by a tempting female, Jadis the White Witch, who offers him a forbidden comestible. When Aslan dies for Edmund, the stone table breaks, Edmund is redeemed, death runs backward and Aslan is resurrected. The reference is obvious, as Lewis certainly intended that it should be. He is a little more oblique in Perelandra, but not much. Here, the Green Lady is subjected to considerable rhetoric by the un-man, whose persuasive efforts are to get her to disobey Maleldil's prohibition and sleep on the fixed land. She is saved from this error by Ransom (his name a fairly obvious pun) who, in this case, prevents the Fall rather than redeeming humanity after it.

We will search in vain through Tolkien's mythology for any such specificity. Tolkien wanted very much not

to do exactly what Lewis wanted very much to do, and both, I suspect, for the same reason: each was in search of a particular (though for each, a different) response from his reader. Lewis wanted to be direct; Tolkien wanted to be indirect. Lewis wanted to put his reader in touch with the events of Judeo-Christian mythology; Tolkien wanted his reader to find them for himself. Lewis comes close to allegory; Tolkien stays nearer to metaphor. Tolkien's work is invested with Christian meaning, but devoid of any re-use of specific Christian events, and especially The Event.

A more artistic, less technical reason for Tolkien's omission has to do with the nature of the world which Tolkien has created, and the way in which its elements interact. He explained this in a letter to a reader:

I suppose a difference between this Myth and what may be perhaps called Christian mythology is this. In the latter the Fall of Man is subsequent to and a consequence (though not a necessary consequence) of the 'Fall of the Angels': a rebellion of created free-will at a higher level than Man; but it is not clearly held (and in many versions is not held at all) that this affected the 'World' in its nature: evil was brought in from outside, by Satan. In this Myth the rebellion of created free-will precedes the creation of the world (Ea); and Ea has in it, subcreatively introduced, evil, rebellions, discordant elements of its own nature already when the Let it Be was spoken. The Fall or corruption, therefore, of all things in it and all inhabitants of it, was a possibility, if not inevitable. (TLOT, pp. 286-287)

Thus the nature of Tolkien's world derives directly from the rebellion and the discord which preceded and in large measure shaped it. The strife is already in the Music which is the blueprint for creation, but there by Melkor's defiance of Eru's theme and his insistence on introducing a theme of his own. The Fall occurs before history begins.

Tolkien's approach is to build on this first Fall a series of lesser Falls, each the consequence in some way of the one before it, each of which brings evil, but none of which wreaks irreparable damage on humanity -- that is, all of the Free Peoples -- as a whole. First of the lesser Falls is that of Feanor, the elven smith who refuses to give back the light. Next is that of his people, the Noldor, who, as a consequence of his refusal, defy the angelic powers to leave Aman, the holy place, for darkened Middle-earth. The only Fall which in any way resembles the Judeo-Christian one is the Fall of the Men of Numenor, well along in Tolkien's history, when they defy a prohibition, the Ban of the Valar, and set foot in the Undying Lands. But unlike the Judeo-Christian sequence, this is a consequence of evil rather than the genesis of it, and occurs toward the end of the myth, not at the beginning.

Corollary to these lesser Falls is a series of lesser salvations, partial rescues in which humanity,

or a portion thereof, is saved from evil, but in each case only temporarily. These are important episodes in Tolkien's story, but it is clear that each is a momentary reprieve, the winning of a battle, but not of the war. Analysis of four examples of such lesser salvation will show to what degree each approximates the Christian model, and how and why each departs from it.

The first of the saviours is Earendil, whose coming is adumbrated through much of The Silmarillion. Earendil is half-elven, a blend of Tolkien's two major races, son of an elven princess, Idril, and a mortal man, Tuor. Tolkien's half-elven are a deliberate intermixture of the natural and the supernatural, and evoke all those heroes of myth and literature from Theseus to Achilles who are the products of a union between a god or goddess and a mortal. The Christian hero is, of course, Christ, begotten of God, born to Mary.

Earendil's part in the mythology is to intercede with the Valar on behalf of Men and Elves. He is a petitioner pleading pardon for the Noldor and forgiveness and mercy for both of Tolkien's races. He is described as "the looked for that cometh at unawares, the longed for that cometh beyond hope." [3] When his mission is successfully completed, he is lifted up "even into the oceans of heaven." (TS, p. 250). Abstracted from the story he looks remarkably Christlike. He is of natural and supernatural parentage; his coming has been prophesied; he comes unexpectedly; his mission is to save humanity; and finally, he is lifted up into the heavens where he and the jewel he wears, the Silmaril, become a light unto men.

But in the context of the story these allusions to Christ recede, while the events and background surrounding them provide a different perspective. The intercession of the Valar is temporary, and does not work for all time. Unlike Jesus, Earendil marries, and when he voyages through the heavens, his wife, Elwing, waits for him. By "heavens" Tolkien plainly means the sky as seen from earth, not the abode of God. Earendil, like similar figures in both American Indian and northern European myth and legend, is the personification of a star, the evening and morning star which our un-mythic culture identifies as the planet Venus. And while the light of a particular bright star readily translates into a spiritual metaphor (as it did for the Anglo-Saxon poem Crist which probably gave Tolkien the concept [4]), it has other associations as well. The Norse form of the name is Orvandil, and Orvandils-ta is Orvandil's frozen toe, broken off by the god Thor and flung into the sky, where it remained as a star. [5] Thus the name and therefore the figure, has as much a pagan as a Christian aspect. It seems clear that Tolkien is deliberately mingling pagan and Christian elements so that neither will predominate. Both contribute something to his story, but the meld of the two makes Tolkien's Earendil into something new which can still remind the reader of something old.

Another character whose actions and attributes seem to fit the role of saviour is Gandalf. Considered only in the context of The Lord of the Rings, he would at first seem to conform to the pattern beautifully. But we must acknowledge both his prior introduction in The Hobbit and his subsequent assimilation into the mythic pattern of The Silmarillion. In The Hobbit he is simply the wizard and wise old man who traditionally aids the hero of the fairy tale. With the publication of The Lord of the Rings Tolkien wove him into the

fabric of his cosmology as one of the Istari, an order of wizards.

His character is most memorable in The Lord of the Rings, where his most dramatic act is the willing sacrifice of himself to save his companions on the Bridge of Khazad Dum. His ordeal with the Balrog includes a journey into the underworld, a death, and a resurrection. Moreover, Tolkien's narrative makes it clear that he knew what was in store for him and went deliberately to meet it. When he returns transformed from Grey to White, he appears first to his followers and they do not recognize him. The sequence is familiar to any reader of the Gospels.

His name, too, is evocative. Tolkien borrowed it from the catalogue of dwarfs in Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda. [6] Philologist that he was, Tolkien certainly knew the meanings and resonances of the name. The usual translation of Gandalf is "sorcerer elf." The "sorcerer" fits well enough with "wizard" to let it pass, although sorcery is most often linked with black magic where wizardry is not. But it is the alf, not the Gand that is of interest here. Jacob Grimm points out that the Elder Edda several times associates alfar (that is, elves) with aesir (that is, gods) "as though they were a compendium of higher beings." (GTM, p.443). He also associates alf with Latin albus, "white or light colored." The American Heritage Dictionary traces alf back to Indo-European albho-, "white." We can safely assume that Tolkien, well aware of this trail of meanings, knew what was built into the name he chose for the figure, and that even if he made no use of these connotations in The Hobbit, he knowingly used them in The Lord of the Rings.

The sum of this evidence points persuasively to an interpretation of Gandalf as a kind of Christ. He is a being of light, associated with, or comparable to a god; he is aware of his end before it happens, and accepts it; he dies, is resurrected, transformed, appears to his followers on the road (in this case Fangorn Forest), and at the end of the book, leaves bodily for the Undying Lands.

But again, a larger context blurs the edges of the pattern. To begin with, he is wholly supernatural, not a mortal man, and therefore the one character in the book for whom this concatenation of events and circumstances will seem least miraculous. His return from the dead, far from being trumpeted as a resurrection, is so well hidden that many readers remain unaware that he has died. Moreover, his function within the story is not to save, but to arouse, to galvanize into action. Gandalf Stormcrow brings news of trouble where he goes; he is an alarm, not a salvation. In Tolkien's cosmology he is a kind of demigod, one of the Maiar, or lesser Valar. His true name is Olorin, for which Tolkien supplies no clear meaning. But he glosses the name Gandalf as "the Elf of the Wand," and cites it as the name by which Olorin is called among men. [7] Gandalf is thus specifically fitted into the mythology within the angelic hierarchy, below Eru (the creator) and the Valar, but above men and elves, and outside any pattern which would encompass the God made man who is Christ.

Next, let us consider Aragorn, certainly a saviour, and one who in many respects fits the pattern better than Gandalf. He is mortal, a man, albeit of a very high order. Like Earendil, he is of the half-elven, and thus of both natural and supernatural lineage. He is a king coming to claim his kingdom. He is a healer, as his actions on Weathertop and in the

Houses of Healing demonstrate. He can raise the dead, or the apparently dead, for he brings Eowyn, Merry, and Pippin back from the threshold of death by calling them. His coming ushers in a new era of peace.

In the case of Aragorn, the distinctions between him and Christ are as much of degree as of kind, and can obliquely allude to Christ. Tolkien has (I think deliberately) chosen for Aragorn a pattern into which he and Christ both fit, but which has a wider context than the mythology of either. This is the pattern of the sacral king, a vital element of the mythologies of the ancient world, appearing in Greek, Germanic, and Celtic myth as well as the Christian. In the ancient mythologies such a figure has a role far more physical than spiritual, for his charge and his responsibility is the physical well-being of his kingdom. Sacral kingship is built explicitly on the relationship between the king and his kingdom, and in ancient cultures is manifest chiefly through fertility. The king is the husband of his country, and on his virility and his potency depends its fertility. Such a motif is most manifest in the Celtic ideal of the Waste Land, the barrenness that follows the wounding or the illness of the king. The ancient figure of the maimed king or wounded king which develops from Celtic legend and is assimilated into the grail story is the sacral king robbed of his potency. Aragorn, like Galahad, like Arthur at the start of his reign, is the positive of this figure, the healing king who restores the waste land and brings renewed vitality with his reign.

Little effort is needed to understand how this motif was translated from the material and physical renewal of the Celtic myth to the spiritual rebirth heralded by Christ in Christian mythology. Knowing this pattern, Tolkien fit Aragorn into it, but held him to the physical realm so that he would evoke the lesser figures of Arthur and Galahad, and through them gesture toward Christ rather than directly presenting him. Aragorn's renewal is largely on the physical and material level, and has less to do with spiritual salvation than with the practical aspects of governing, marrying, having children, providing the country with a structure and a direction. Aragorn's re-planting of the White Tree, his union with Arwen, the establishment of a lawful succession, the renewal through his office of the whole of Middle-earth, are the old tradition of the sacral king, as Christ is the new.

Without doubt, the likeliest saviour candidate is Frodo, whose stated mission is to destroy the Ring and thus save Middle-earth and its inhabitants. And here the parallels to Christ, the allusions to the story of the Gospels, are clear, and probably deliberate. There is no doubt that the experiences which Frodo undergoes, the trials, the torments -- all of which contribute thematically to his function in the story -- are reminders of the experiences and ordeals of Christ. Abstracted from the narrative, the list is impressive: Although Frodo voluntarily assumes the burden of the Ring, he feels as if "some other will" is using him. [8] He has a last supper with his followers before setting out on his journey. He suffers five wounds, one a blow in the side with a spear, one a laceration with thorns. He has a moment in a garden where he tries to relinquish his burden and be released from his destiny. He undergoes temptation in the wilderness. He is betrayed by one of his followers. His way is dolorous, his ascent of the mountain painful; he is burdened with a heavy cross. His surrender of himself at the end is total.

Beyond these specifics, the character Tolkien has given Frodo fits the paradigm of Christ; he is

certainly the most Christlike of all Tolkien's saviour figures. He is a beloved master, patient in suffering, stern in righteousness, forgiving of his enemies, or at least of the closest enemy -- Gollum. He is a willing sacrifice. Both in terms of event and in terms of character, Frodo's story would seem to fit perfectly into the larger, Christian story. But herein lies Tolkien's strength as a myth maker and as a weaver of tales. For the events and the character cannot be divided from the narrative without doing damage to both the character and the story. Tolkien means to remind the reader, through Frodo, of Christ. But he just as surely means for his reader to be able to tell the difference between them. This is the strength of the narrative, and its poignance.

For the underlying purpose of the parallels is to underscore the fact that Frodo is not Christ, that he is (literally) too small for the burden he has to carry, that in the end he fails. By deliberately placing the burdens of Christ on the shoulders of someone who is not big enough to bear them, Tolkien makes his story immensely moving, resonant in its implications, and considerably more modern than we might at first expect. Unlike Earendil, unlike Gandalf, unlike Aragorn, Frodo is a failed hero, and as such he speaks directly to an age immersed in doubt, an age which wants belief but cannot trust it, an age which stumbles into disbelief at every turn of modern life.

But like Aragorn, Frodo fits a larger pattern, one which allies him with Christ but just as much with other, similar figures in the mythic past. For he too derives from the ancient hero tradition, and has significant similarities with the figure of the wounded king. Frodo's size and hobbit origins camouflage his archetypal characteristics, but they are as much a part of him as they are of Aragorn, and for the same reasons. Like Aragorn, Frodo is of mixed ancestry; through the fabulous Belladonna Took he has a strain of fairy, and so is parallel to half-elven Earendil, to Aragorn, indeed to all the heroes of myth and legend who are born of a natural and supernatural union.

And, like Aragorn, Frodo is an avatar of the figure of the sacral king, a bringer of peace, prosperity, and fertility. His name is even more revealing of his function than is Gandalf's of his implicit characteristics. The name Frodo or Frodi is one prominent in northern European myth and legend. It is the name of several kings and heroes, the most notable of whom appears in the Prose Edda as a bringer of a time of peace and prosperity known as "Frodi's Peace," a time when men were so ungreedy and unwarlike that a gold ring lay unprotected on Gnita heath and no one presumed to take it. This King Frodi seems to be a counter part of the Norse god Freyr, one of the oldest of the pagan fertility gods of northern Europe. One of Freyr's epithets is inn frodi, "the fruitful," and both figures may be aspects of the same principle. [9] The Norse word frodr, usually translated "fruitful," or "wise", probably derives from the Indo-European root pra-, "wise, well-traveled," but during the Middle Ages was also associated with the principles expressed in the Indo-European root pri-, "to love," and both were associated with Freyr and Frodi.

It seems clear that Tolkien's choice of Frodo as the name of his hobbit-hero was deliberate, and intended to associate Frodo with all these figures. But it is just as clear that the association is negative rather than positive, intended to bring poignance to Frodo's failure. For he is that most moving of hero types, one whose sacrifice benefits everyone but himself, one who, in saving the world (as Frodo does

through Sam and Gollum) loses it. Aragorn the healer, Frodo the wounded figure, both evocative of Christ, share between them the renewal of Middle-earth.

Of all Tolkien's saviours, Frodo alone loses everything. He undergoes a spiritual death with no promise of rebirth. The parallel with Christ so movingly suggested breaks down at this point. Both Frodo and Christ offer themselves and are used. Christ emerges whole and transfigured. Frodo does not. He loses himself, loses his shadow, loses the Ring at the climactic moment at the Cracks of Doom where he succumbs to temptation (but after how long and desperate a struggle!), and suddenly becomes sinning Adam, not redeeming Christ. Nothing is promised him in recompense, nothing given. He is mortal man who will die, not knowing what comes next.

Each of these figures falls short of the paradigm in some way, but precisely because they fall short, because they are part of Tolkien's own story and not of the Christian story, they can suggest the latter and enhance its meaning and largeness. The central event only happens once. And ultimately, Tolkien's mythology is not, as Lewis' emphatically is, a re-telling of the Judeo-Christian mythos. It is intended to complement Christianity, to translate its meaning but not its plot, into an imaginative world.

Tolkien seems to be suggesting that, Christ or no Christ, the light is there if one wants to find it. In his world the Fall, the separation from God, from the light, is a gradual process. It is a sequence of many individual decisions, each with its consequences, none irreversable. The process is continual, encompassing both fall and redemption as parts of a whole. We might say that Tolkien's world is falling rather than fallen, that it is dynamic rather than static, and that, since it emphasizes transition rather than transaction, no one act will buy back all that has been lost.

Thus, by not retelling the events of the Christian story, Tolkien leaves his reader free to find them at will, free to make associations, apply interpretations, bring to bear on the story whatever seems personally most vital and immediate. Tolkien's mythos is a mirror, reflecting at a distance the themes and actions of many mythologies, but leaving at the center a space for his audience to see itself, and thus to participate in the story.

NOTES

[1] The American Heritage Dictionary, ed. William Morris (New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., 1970).

[2] J.R.R. Tolkien, The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, ed. Humphrey Carpenter with Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1981), p.172. Subsequent page references will be cited parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation TLOT.

[3] J.R.R. Tolkien, The Silmarillion, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1977), pp. 248-249. Subsequent page references will be cited parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation TS.

[4] Humphrey Carpenter, Tolkien: A Biography (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1977), p. 64.

[5] Jacob Grimm, Teutonic Mythology, trans. James Steven Stallybrass. 4 Vols. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1966), Vol. I, p. 375. Subsequent page references will be cited parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation GTM.

[6] Snorri Sturluson, The Prose Edda, trans. Jean Young (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965),

pp. 41-42.

[7] J.R.R. Tolkien, Unfinished Tales of Numenor and Middle-earth, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1980), p. 391.

[8] J.R.R. Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings, 3 Vols. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965), Vol. I, p. 354.

[9] Hilda Ellis Davidson, Gods and Myths of Northern Europe (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1964), pp. 103-104.

SUBMISSIONS

Mythlore actively seeks submissions of articles, art, letters of comment, poetry, reviews and other relevant material. See page 2 for the addresses of the appropriate editors when making submissions.

All written submissions, including articles, columns, letters, poetry and reviews must be in one of two forms:

(1) Type-written submissions must be double spaced. Two copies should be submitted, including the original.

(2) Submissions done on a word-processor must be in columns exactly 4 1/2" wide with both right and left hand margins justified, elite type-face, single spaced, with double spacing between paragraphs or indented quotations. Footnotes, bibliographies, and works cited sections must be single spaced.

Submissions should be done on a daisy wheel printer or dot matrix printer with letter quality reproduction. The original rather than a xerox copy must be sent.

This form of submission saves Mythlore time and money and in effect represents a much-appreciated contribution to the Society, and is strongly encouraged whenever possible.

The preferred style of articles is the MLA Handbook, except that short citations such as ibid., op. cit., and author and page number, be incorporated in parentheses in the text. Any additional questions concerning submissions should be addressed to the editor.

ART SUBMISSIONS

Submissions of art are strongly encouraged and requested. They may be drawings of scenes from, or thematic treatments of, the works of Tolkien, Lewis, and/or Williams, as well as general treatments of fantastic and mythological themes. Art should be 4 1/2" wide and from 1 to 5 1/2" tall. Full page art should be 7 1/2" wide by 10" tall. Address inquiries to the Art Editor (see page 2 for address).



Errata

The continuation note for Paul Nolan Hyde's column was inadvertently left off page 18. It should be noted that the column is continued on page 23.

The Associate Editor profusely apologizes to Alexei Kondratiev for misspelling his name throughout the issue.

The Editors regret a printer's error which omitted the top portion of the cover art of the last issue, and plan to reprint the art as an interior illustration in a future issue.