J.R.R. Tolkien, the Influence of Christianity, and Symbolism in *The Lord of the Rings*

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ABSTRACT

J.R.R. Tolkien, the Influence of Christianity, and Symbolism in *The Lord of the Rings*

by

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My project focuses on Christological symbolism in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. I investigated which figure in the story embodies Christ. In order to build my case, I researched Tolkien's life and the impact religion had on him. Tolkien was a devout Catholic and his religious beliefs impacted several of his key relationships: with his Mother, his wife, and his best friend and fellow author, C.S. Lewis. By exploring Tolkien's life, I emphasize the importance of religion to both his upbringing and his overall perspective, demonstrating how his beliefs could have infiltrated his fantasy writing.

Though Tolkien claimed any symbolism in *The Lord of the Rings* was unintentional, I argue that Catholicism's subconscious effect on his world perspective led him to unconsciously create a story that strong reflects Catholic Christian themes. Through exploring Catholic doctrine, the conclusion I have come to is that Frodo and Gandalf are both Christ figures. The emphasis in Catholicism seems to me to be asserting the true divinity and true humanity of Jesus. Frodo would be representative of the fully human aspect of Jesus and Gandalf would represent the fully divine.

My paper concludes with a detailed comparison of Christ with both of these characters. I show how each character is Christ-like not only in their actions, but also in their character traits and relationship to other characters in the story. I further highlight how these similarities show Frodo to be the human representation of Christ and Gandalf to be the divine.

Preface

From the many works on J.R.R. Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings* I have read, it seems as though the scholar who researches in this field does so out of a deep love and personal connection with Tolkien's creation; my case is no different. I became enraptured with the world of Middle Earth after my first reading of *The Hobbit* in the sixth grade and with the help of Peter Jackson's film adaptations. *The Lord of the Rings* was a constant point of conversation and obsession in my small group of friends. More than any of my peers, I was completely taken by the depth of the world Tolkien created with its many races of mythical creatures, new languages, histories, and dynamic characters. My fascination with Tolkien's work has carried on for many years and been revealed in my academic work.

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was profoundly religious, a trait I like to think we share although he was much more adherent to the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church than I am of my own denomination's. Though he was not necessarily vocal about his faith, religion played a key role in his personal development and many of his relationships. When he did share his religious opinions, they often came out in his beliefs about myth and writing. Tolkien said that the stories seemed to write themselves; he did not consider himself to be the inventor of these stories but merely their recorder (*Letters* 231). Perhaps he believed his work was divinely inspired—according to Bradley Birzer, Tolkien believed his stories were written by God (25). While Tolkien did not consciously intend religious symbolism in many of his works, one could argue that his religion is subconsciously reflected through his character and story developments.

With this frame of reference in mind, I began my research into Christian symbolism in *The Lord of the Rings*. Simply reading through the novels, one may notice many of the events and overall themes of *The Lord of the Rings* bear similarities to the Gospels and the larger Christian epic. Even particular characters in the work seem to parallel Christian figures. For example, Gandalf the wizard is resurrected from the dead after sacrificing himself just like Christ is resurrected after his sacrifice. In consideration of the two stories similarities, I wanted to find out which character embodies Christ. I have been trying to determine which character is the Christ figure of this story for 8 or 9 years. I sought for any evidence in Tolkien's letters, essays, and manuscripts that he was subconsciously creating Christ-figures. Whatever Tolkien's true intentions, I was prepared to argue my case that Christian symbolism, specifically a Christ-figure, is present in *The Lord of the Rings*. His imagery and character descriptions pointed me in several directions. All I had to do was find a persuasive argument for why a particular figure was actually the Christ of the story.

The answer came to me by way of Tolkien himself. In his letters, Tolkien discusses Gandalf frequently in relation to his divine, incarnated nature. While he clearly asserts that Gandalf is not God, he repetitively says that Gandalf had to take on the temptations of the flesh in order to help Middle Earth (*Letters* 202, 203). He also affirms that although Gandalf is one of several incarnate beings, he is the only one who can and does ultimately resist the temptation of sin; Gandalf succeeds where all others have failed. Frodo, on the other hand, is marked by his sincere humanity. Tolkien describes hobbits as being the closest relatives to humans and frequently portrays Frodo as humble,

pure-hearted, and selfless. Tolkien emphasizes the importance of Frodo's sacrifice and confirms that Frodo undertakes his journey out of love for the world of Middle Earth.

By considering their individual story lines, I saw that the Christ figure became quite evident: both Gandalf and Frodo have a part to play in representing Christ. My evidence for this case will constitute a large part of this paper. First, however, I will begin with a brief overview of how scholars have previously approached Christianity and *The Lord of the Rings*. Next, I will explore Tolkien as an individual: his early life, his family and friendships, his participation in the Inklings, his religion, and his writings. Using his letters and biographical information, I will highlight the historical context in which he wrote *The Lord of the Rings* and his opinions of both his own work and others' critiques. I will then briefly explore Roman Catholicism and its Christology. Finally, I will use all of this background information about Tolkien and Catholicism in supporting my case for Christian symbolism.

Previous Scholarship on J.R.R. Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings*

The array of scholarship on J.R.R. Tolkien and his work is vast; scholars have examined the man and the myth from nearly every angle. For those wishing to break into this field, the sheer volume of work on this topic makes it difficult to know where to begin. In order to situate myself in conversation with these scholars, I have studied an array of scholarly approaches to Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings*. Some works I have read seek to examine Tolkien's perspective on myth and how his beliefs are reflected through symbolism in his work; others merely utilize his work as a foundation for exploring larger religious and ethical themes. Still others have sought to dissuade the reader from inferring any religious symbolism in the text at all.

In a recent publication, Paul E. Kerry offered the realm of Tolkien studies a marvelous gift: he laid out a history of Christian approaches to *The Lord of the Rings* in his essay collection, *The Ring and the Cross*. Kerry makes clear the necessity of his work on the first page of his introduction: "Due diligence is imperative as there has been an unfortunate tendency in Tolkien studies to neglect significant insights that have been made in previous monographs, articles, and essays on the subject" (17). The introduction to *The Ring and the Cross* outlines the major arguments and themes in this field so that scholars coming to Tolkien's text for the first time have a place to begin their work.

Kerry begins with a short explanation of Tolkien's views. He notes the importance of Roman Catholicism in Tolkien's family and upbringing: "He was a practicing Christian committed to Roman Catholic theology, doctrine, and ritual, convinced of its universality, truthfulness, goodness, beauty, and salvific power" (18). This fact about Tolkien should be the driving force behind every new interpretation of his

work. But Tolkien himself explicitly claimed that *The Lord of the Rings* was not allegory for anything, which would seem to preclude religious allegory (Kerry 18). The scholar then must proceed cautiously when arguing for any symbolism in the text.

Next, Kerry surveys the major arguments and themes in Tolkien research by dividing them into the following subgroups: themes of morality, Christian romanticism, Tolkien's Christianity and modernity, good versus evil and the question of free will, the impact of *Beowulf*, Christian references, the Christian political order, sub-creation and eucatastrophe, and Roman Catholic interpretations; he also focuses briefly on *The Silmarillion* and the *Legendarium*. Under each sub-heading, Kerry details chronologically the authors who have contributed to Tolkien studies and the theses of their works. For the purposes of my project, I found the sections on Christian references and Roman Catholic interpretations to be the most pertinent.

The first scholar to formally observe Christ-imagery in *The Lord of the Rings* was Gracia Fay Ellwood in 1970 (Kerry 32). Many others followed suit shortly after Ellwood's publication; among these scholars are Kathleen Jones, Stratford Caldecott, Jean Chausse, and Peter J. Kreeft (Kerry 33). Jones theorized that Tolkien originally modeled Frodo after Christ but decided to deviate from the equivalence by having Frodo ultimately fail at his task (Kerry 33). Caldecott determined the characters of Gandalf, Aragorn, and Frodo together to make up a Christ-like figure (Kerry 33). Chausse "identified three figures of Christ or 'facets of the personality of Jesus'—Laborer, Sufferer, and King—that correspond to Gandalf, Frodo, and Aragorn" (Kerry 33). In 2005, Kreeft argued that many parallels of Christ's historical life were hidden throughout

The Lord of the Rings but he also advocated the triune approach of Gandalf, Frodo, and Aragorn as the threefold Messianic symbol of prophet, priest, and king (33).

Under the sub-heading of "Roman Catholic Interpretations," Kerry discusses the connections scholars have made between particular aspects of Catholic ritual and *The Lord of the Rings*. One of these scholars is James Lynch, who in 1978 noticed that the several feast scenes in Tolkien's story heavily resembled the Eucharistic feast (Kerry 43). Others such as Kath Filmer in 1987 identified the elvish goods of *lembas* and *miruvor* as the bread and the wine of the Eucharist (Kerry 33). There has also been a tendency among Catholic scholars such as Elwood in 1970 to equate the character Galadriel to Mary, Jesus' mother (Kerry 45). The overall summary provided by Kerry suggests that Catholic interpretations to this point have focused on the sacramental symbolism in *The Lord of the Rings* as well as saintly imagery and sacrificial love.

I looked closer at a few texts to garner scholarly opinions about Christian symbolism in Tolkien's writings. One of these texts was Richard L. Purtill's *J.R.R. Tolkien: Myth, Morality, and Religion,* mentioned in Kerry's "historiography." The heart of Purtill's writing appears concerned with Tolkien's relationship with mythology. His particular interest in *The Lord of the Rings* is how it uses myth to communicate morality. When he delves into the details of the story, he notices the likeness of Frodo's journey to that of Christ (56). Putrill sees Frodo as Christ-like only in regards to his extreme suffering because he believes Frodo's vocation is to act like a follower of Christ (57, 80). As for Gandalf, Putrill is insistent that he is not Christ but, like Frodo, is an example of how a true follower of Christ should live (87).

In *J.R.R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth*, Bradley J. Birzer also dissects Tolkien's relationship to mythology. He discusses Tolkien's thoughts on "sub-creation," the form of creation that humans can partake in, and how *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* are products of this process. He claims, "Most importantly, fairy stories and fantasy allow the writer to act as a sub-creator, an artist made and making in the image of the ultimate creator, God" (39). As we are made in the image of God, we seek to create like God does. When Birzer points the reader to Tolkien's belief in religion as "true myth," one might assume Tolkien believed all successful myth would reflect the myth of Christianity (26). In regards to Christ-imagery, Birzer examines Frodo as representing the priestly aspect of Christ and Aragorn as the Christ-like king come to Middle Earth to restore order. Gandalf, however, he merely mentions as serving the Holy Spirit (what Gandalf refers to as "Secret Fire") and not in conjunction with his Christ-like qualities (62). He makes some note of other characters in the story and their representative roles; Sam, for instance, he likens to St. John the Evangelist to Frodo's Christ (72). But Birzer also explores these character's similarities to other great mythical figures like King Arthur and Beowulf.

Another method of analysis uses *The Lord of the Rings* to investigate Christian virtues. Kurt Bruner and Jim Ware produced *Finding God in* The Lord of the Rings in this manner. They describe specific scenes from the story and apply them to a modern Christian worldview. Bruner and Ware associate the different plot events surrounding Frodo, Gandalf, and Aragorn with episodes in Christ's life, but these authors make no definitive remarks about symbolism contained in the story. In the realm of Tolkien literature, many other works utilize *The Lord of the Rings* in this fashion. At times,

interpretations like Bruner and Ware's can be helpful for analyzing the overarching themes of Tolkien's writings, but the authors rarely commit to any claims about symbolism in the story. They employ *The Lord of the Rings* more as springboard for their intended message.

My purpose is to make decisive claims about symbolism in *The Lord of the Rings*. Like many of the authors whose work I have reviewed, I will draw on Tolkien's biography, his letters, and Catholic doctrine to uncover this symbolism. By closely examining the descriptions, relationships, and events surrounding Gandalf and Frodo, I hope to show how each character is representative of Christ. Gandalf, the incarnate divine being sent to Middle Earth to fight Sauron's power, embodies Christ's true divinity. Frodo, the humble hobbit who selflessly undertook the great quest to save Middle Earth by destroying the One Ring, symbolizes Christ's true humanity. Together they typify each facet of Christ's life and mission on Earth.

J.R.R. Tolkien

Tolkien was born on January 3, 1892 to Arthur and Mabel Tolkien. At the time of his birth, the family was situated in South Africa where Arthur had moved to take a job with the Bank of Africa. J.R.R.'s brother, Hilary Arthur Reuel Tolkien, was born just two years later in 1894. Tolkien was sickly as a young child, poorly effected by the South African heat, so Mabel took the children on an extended vacation to England in the Spring of 1895 (Carpenter 23). His health improved over the spring and summer. His father, however, still in South Africa, contracted rheumatic fever in November. Arthur could not bear the English winter so he remained in South Africa (Carpenter 24). By the time Mabel arranged for the family to return, Arthur suffered a severe hemorrhage and died in February 1896.

After her husband's death, Mabel decided the family would remain permanently in England. During their visit they had lived at the home of Mabel's parents and this is where they lingered until Mabel found a comfortable, independent home. Tolkien was only five years old. Humphrey Carpenter explains that at this time Tolkien became close to his mother's family, learning their ways as he grew into adolescence (26). Mabel finally located a cheap home for her and the children in the summer of 1896 and moved the family to Sarehole, a hamlet just outside of the city. Carpenter claims this move would have a permanent effect on Tolkien and his work: "Just at the age when his imagination was opening out, he found himself in the English countryside" (27).

Unfortunately, the family had to move away from this new home later that year to be closer to King Edward's School when J.R.R. began to attend. J.R.R. developed his love of language during these first years at King Edward's; he began to learn Greek

language and English literature and was also mesmerized by Chaucer's Middle English (Carpenter 36).

Mabel was hospitalized and diagnosed with diabetes in April 1904; Father Francis Morgan, a close friend from the Birmingham Oratory, found the family a new place to stay in Rednal for the summer. The family stayed over into the fall as Mabel's condition worsened. In November, she sank into a diabetic coma and died after six days. The boys were now orphaned; Mabel had appointed Father Francis Morgan as their new guardian in her will. He found a home for the boys, now aged 13 and 11, with their Aunt Beatrice. This home was close to the Birmingham Oratory where Father Francis Morgan lived so the boys visited him frequently (Carpenter 41).

Tolkien continued on with his studies at King Edward's and found a best friend by the name of Christopher Wiseman. Father Francis eventually realized Mabel's sons were unhappy with their Aunt Beatrice. He found them better lodging nearby with a woman named Mrs. Faulkner. This is where Tolkien first met Edith Bratt, another orphan taken in by Mrs. Faulker, who was three years older than he was. The two fell in love and eventually married in 1916 after a period of separation, Edith's conversion to Catholicism, and a two-year engagement.

Tolkien won an exhibition to Oxford and started in Fall 1911. He would eventually be admitted into the Honor School of English Language and Literature where he would develop his skills as a philologist. He also had a habit of forming small clubs where he could share his talents with others he felt were also talented. At King Edward's, the club was called the "T.C.B.S."; at Oxford he created the "Apolausticks". Later in life, he would form the Inklings with C.S. Lewis and other notable English

writers and thinkers. Through these groups, J.R.R. was able to voice his opinions and seek feedback from others. They offered support for his creative endeavors.

Shortly after marrying Edith in 1916, Tolkien embarked for France as a soldier in World War I. During his participation in the war, Edith gave birth to their first son, John, in 1917. After the war was over, Tolkien took on academic positions at Oxford, as a tutor, and then at Leeds University. Edith gave birth to second son, Michael, in 1922 and third son, Christopher, in 1924. That year he also officially entered his professorship at Leeds University. Over the next decade, he would publish his first work, meet C.S. Lewis, form the "Inklings," and welcome a daughter named Priscilla.

The Hobbit was first published in 1937 and Tolkien formally began work on a sequel. His work on this sequel, which would eventually become *The Lord of the Rings*, would continue through the entirety of World War II and beyond. Although he finished the piece in 1949, it was not published until 1954 and 1955. Much of the rest of Tolkien's time was consumed by his professorship at Oxford, which he was granted in 1945. He would go on to write and publish a few other works over the next two decades following *The Lord of the Rings*. His wife Edith died in 1971 and Tolkien followed soon after in 1973 at 81 years of age.

The Role of Roman Catholicism

Roman Catholicism would play a very significant role in Tolkien's upbringing and life. Both of his parents' families were originally Protestant. After Arthur's death, when Mabel moved the boys to Sarehole, religion would become an important aspect of Tolkien family life. Each Sunday she would take the boys to church; Mabel soon made the transition from visiting an Anglican church to St. Anne's Roman Catholic Church. In June 1900, she converted to Catholicism with her sister May against their Protestant family's wishes (Carpenter 31). Their conversion would arouse the acute wrath of their father, John Suffield, who forbade May from entering a Catholic church ever again (Carpenter 32). Mabel, who had depended on May's husband after Arthur's death, was cut off from his financial support and spurned by the rest of her family. Mabel's Catholicism was also strongly opposed by the Tolkien family who were staunch Baptists. Humphrey Carpenter remarks that the stress of this hostility and loss of financial support began to take a toll on Mabel's health but it did not stop her from imparting her new religion to her two sons (32).

When the family relocated to Mosley for J.R.R.'s education, Mabel sought a local Catholic house of worship and eventually found herself at the Birmingham Oratory. This is where she met Father Francis Morgan who became integral to the Tolkien household (Carpenter 35). When she became very ill and died suddenly in 1904, she signed her sons over to Father Francis in her will. He had to find a new home for J.R.R. and his brother, but feared that both the Suffield and the Tolkien families would take advantage of Mabel's death as a chance to push the boys away from Roman Catholicism (Carpenter 40). He chose to move them in with their Aunt Beatrice because she was not particularly

religious. This move would allow the boys to remain close to the Birmingham Oratory and Father Francis (Carpenter 41).

Carpenter is able to articulate the importance of both Mabel and Roman Catholicism on J.R.R. with this quote from Tolkien:

> My own dear mother was a martyr indeed, and it is not to everybody that God grants so easy a way to his great gifts as he did to Hilary and myself, giving us a mother who killed herself with labour and trouble to ensure us keeping the faith. (39)

Tolkien clearly credits his mother's influence as the cause of his religious beliefs. Carpenter believed that after her death, religion consoled J.R.R. both emotionally and spiritually (39). Catholicism would continue to factor into his relationships with many other individuals, including his wife and his friend C.S. Lewis.

Both Edith and C.S. Lewis would be converted to some form of Christianity because of Tolkien, evidencing the strength and centrality of religion in his life. Carpenter describes Edith as a very active member of the Church of England but she chose to convert to Catholicism in 1914 for Tolkien (73). J.R.R. desperately wanted their marriage to be blessed by the Catholic Church so her conversion at this time was paramount. Once she was officially received into the church, the two were formally betrothed.

Lewis, on the other hand, was a firm atheist when he first met Tolkien in 1926. In *Tolkien and C.S. Lewis: The Gift of Friendship*, Colin Duriez explains Lewis originally accepted theism in 1929 (50). Two years later, after a night-long conversation with Tolkien and another devoutly Christian friend, Hugo Dyson, Lewis finally converted to a Protestant faith (53). Duriez acknowledges that it was Tolkien's measured arguments about the Christian Gospel and universal love that ultimately convinced Lewis to turn to

Christianity on that momentous night (54). The influence of this conversion and new faith would play significantly into Lewis' developments as an author and theologian from that point onward. He would dabble in popular theology with works like *Mere Christianity* and *The Screwtape Letters* and Christian symbolism would manifest itself in his fantasy works such as *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

Tolkien strongly disapproved of his friend's adventures into theology and his blatant use of Christian symbolism (Duriez 124). Duriez explains, "Tolkien was committed to a much more allusive approach of the creative artist steeped in the Christian faith and had little sympathy for Lewis' direct approach" (124). Despite his conscious intentions, Tolkien's own works did not seem to be able to escape the influence of his religious upbringing. *The Silmarillion*, published posthumously in 1977, is arguably the most obviously religious of Tolkien's masterpieces.

The Simarillion was written as the creation epic of Middle Earth. In a letter to Katherine Farrer, Tolkien claims to have begun this piece as early as 1914 (*Letters* 130). The story features the act of creation by the god, Ilúvatar, and his heavenly court, the Valar as well as his struggles with the evil rebel Melkor. Tolken explains in a letter to Milton Waldeman that

> The main body of the tale, the *Silmarillion* proper, is about the fall of the most gifted kindred of the Elves, their exile from Valinor (a kind of Paradise, the home of the Gods), in the furthest West, their re-entry into Middle-earth, the land of their birth but long under the rule of the Enemy, and their strife with him, the power of Evil still visibly incarnate. (*Letters* 148)

This work was so important to Tolkien that he insisted that his publishers Allen & Unwin to publish *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* together. When they denied his demands to publish *The Simarillion*, Tolkien sought other publishers who would. He was

ultimately unsuccessful in achieving this feat and published *The Lord of the Rings* on its own with Allen & Unwin in 1954 and '55.

While *The Lord of the Rings* may not seem as overtly Christian as *The Silmarillion*, strong similarities between the Biblical text and Tolkien's plot still show through. *The Lord of the Rings* contains both divine beings and a fallen creation, this time concerned mainly with the fallen kingdoms of mankind. A single individual is responsible for carrying the load of evil across Middle Earth, hoping to destroy the power of the enemy Sauron. Frodo's self-sacrifice brings about the salvation of Middle Earth from this evil and the temptation of power and the redemption of mankind. By exploring his story in greater depth, I hope to draw out further similarities that can support an argument for Christian symbolism.

Tolkien on Myth

Tolkien was vehemently opposed to writing allegory. When several critics claimed that *The Lord of the Rings* was an allegory, he explicitly denied it. He did not want his work viewed as intentional allegory of any kind. He acknowledged, however, that if a story was truly successful, it would be easy for the reader to find allegory in it. With *The Lord of the Rings* in particular, he explained

> You can make the Ring into an allegory for our own time, if you like: an allegory of the inevitable fate that waits for all attempts to defeat evil power by power. But that is only because all power magical or mechanical does always so work. You cannot write a story about an apparently simple magic ring without that bursting in, if you really take the ring seriously, and make things happen that would happen, if such a thing existed. (*Letters* 121)

By making the workings of his fantasy world consistent with those of this world, Tolkien expected that his tightly woven story would appear as allegory, although he never intended it as such.

In Tolkien's mind, myth was an act of sub-creation. He expressed his opinions on sub-creation in both his letters and in a lecture he gave entitled "On Fairy Stories" which was later published as a part of *The Tolkien Reader* in 1966. He highlights at the end of this lecture his theological beliefs that man is created in the image of God, making us distinct in God's creation. Duriez summarizes, "Our ability to speak, love, and create fantasy originates in this imageness of God" (72). When we create our own worlds through fantasy, we necessarily mimic God's own creation because our abilities to create are derived from being made in the image of our creator (Duriez 72).

Fairy-story and myth were Tolkien's primary concern in writing *The Lord of the Rings*. He believed his story would be reflective of the truth of the world as "fairy story has its own mode of reflecting 'truth', different from allegory…" (*Letters* 233). But in

order for this to occur, first his work "must succeed just as a tale, excite, please, and even on occasion move, and within its own imagined world be accorded (literary) belief" (*Letters* 233). Tolkien expressed that the primary object in his work was to write a successful, exciting tale. By convincing the reader of the reality of his fantasy world, further general truth could be imparted.

When the reader becomes engrossed in the new world, Tolkien says, "myth and fairy-story must, as all art, reflect and contain in solution elements of moral and religious truth (or error), but not explicitly, not in the known form of the primary 'real' world" (*Letters* 144). The story consoles the reader by pointing out religious truth and leading him or her to joy. Tolkien felt that only good stories contain such ability and meaning in that they guide the reader to the greatest story of all, the Gospel of Jesus (Duriez 73). God, the greatest storyteller of all, had entered his own world and given us this truth. Since we are made in his image, we seek to create stories that reflect this supreme truth. As the writer of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien saw himself as a mere recorder of all the magnificent stories God had already written. His passive stance on his own work is articulated throughout his letters by comments such as, "…stories tend to get out of hand, and this has taken an unpremeditated turn" (*Letters* 34). He was following wherever the story led him, caught off-guard at times by the plot development and the length.

Religious symbolism became a question for both Tolkien and his fans. If his myth was successful, it would indeed represent some greater truth, pointing to the story of the Gospel. One family friend and fan reviewed parts of the manuscripts of *The Lord of the Rings* and noted to Tolkien that he felt the work reflected the Order of Grace and that Galadriel in particular reminded him of the Virgin Mary (*Letters* 171-172). Tolkien

responded well to this comparison, observing that all of his own perceptions of beauty were based on Mary. He admits that "*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work" although he did not consciously intend for it to be (*Letters* 172). While Tolkien may not have explored all the rich symbolism his own story contained, he did recognize the influence his religion had on its development. In his reply to this reviewer, he states,

> For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism. (…) For as a matter of fact, I have consciously planned very little; and should chiefly be grateful for having been brought up (since I was eight) in a Faith that has nourished me and taught me all the little that I know. (*Letters* 172)

I would argue that this assertion alone is enough evidence to support the claim of the presence of Christian symbolism in the piece. By realizing the subconscious influence his religion had on his work, Tolkien entitles the reader to investigate what religious symbolism does come through, no matter how unintentional it was in the writing process.

Christ through the Lens of Roman Catholicism

Before considering symbolism in the specific context, storyline, and characters of the *Lord of the Rings*, one must begin with an understanding of the theological framework of Roman Catholicism. Since Tolkien considered himself to be a devout, observant Catholic, knowledge of Catholicism would be helpful in gaining some perspective on his worldview. Christology—the doctrine of Christ's nature—would certainly have informed Tolkien's own opinions. One can gain a distinctive lens for searching for symbolism in Tolkien's work by recognizing the concepts provided by Roman Catholic Christology.

One such concept from Roman Catholic Christology is the doctrine of the two natures of Christ. Jaroslav Pelikan describes the doctrine of the two natures of Christ as arising around Alexandria and in the Latin West, advocated by St. Hilary (315-368$_{CE}$), St. Augustine (345-430$_{CE}$), and Pope Leo I (391-461$_{CE}$); it was articulated in the decree of Chalcedon given by the Fourth Ecumenical Council in 451$_{CE}$ (*Christian Tradition* 256). This decree declares the unity-in-duality contained in the person of Christ: he was, at once, both fully divine and fully human. He was first God, then incarnate in human form as both God and man, and retained this duality to achieve perfect humanity and perfect divinity (*Christian Tradition* 257). The decree of Chalcedon proclaimed that Christ was of the same substance, *homoousios*, with God and begotten before time. Once incarnate, he was also of one substance with humanity. The person of Christ retained these two natures "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation" (*Christian Tradition* 264). These two natures were in the one individual, not separated

into two individuals. However, this union did not take away from the distinctiveness of both natures encompassed by the one being. Pelikan says,

> [This theology's] underlying soteriology required that Christ as Savior be both divine and human, so that he could affect the exchange between himself and the sinner by which he assumed the sins of the world and the sinner became holy. The kenosis of Christ established a new covenant between God and man. (*Christian Tradition* 257)

Without containing the dual natures in one being, Christ could not affect communion between God and man. He had to be God in order to take away sin and man in order to assume the sins of mankind.

In *Christology: True God, True Man*, Matthias Neuman offers a fundamental explanation of Roman Catholic Christology by asserting seven points of conviction about Jesus in this faith: (1) he really lived as Jesus of Nazareth; (2) the Resurrection actually occurred; (3) he was an incarnation of God; (4) his purpose was salvation; (5) he is the fullness of humanity; (6) his presence is continual on earth; and (7) he is the Lord of the future (xiv). Within these seven convictions, we see the two natures of Christ confirmed by the third and the fifth statements. Neuman continues to claim that Jesus' life began a new and final chapter in God's relationship with creation and humanity (2). Jesus performs all actions previously performed only by God, such as the forgiveness of sin, signifying his unity with God (13). Neuman describes the many titles applied to Jesus in the New Testament that communicate his relationship with God and his divinity such as Son of God and Incarnate Word (11).

On the other hand, Neuman asserts that a Catholic Christian faith must affirm the full humanity of Jesus (17). While the underlying reality of Christ is his divinity, he acted and lived on earth with human volitions (Neuman 41). Christ's humanity is

important because, "In his service, love and compassion—in his total humanity—Jesus reveals to us the fullest face of God as we can know it" (Neuman 14). We require Jesus to be fully human in order to bridge the gap between humanity and God. His incarnation becomes our direct link to a God previously unseen. By acting in his full humanity, Jesus also provides us with a model of perfect humanness, an ideal we are taught to strive towards.

Neuman carefully highlights the important events in Jesus' life and ministry that emphasize his power as God and struggles as human. The first is Jesus' baptism that begins his ministry; God claims Jesus as his son, revealing his identity (Neuman 20-1). Second, Jesus battles the temptations in the wilderness. Neuman claims these events are real struggles for Jesus because he experienced temptation in a fully human way (21). In his perfect humanity, he is able to resist temptations previously given into by others, offering us the perfect model. Next, Neuman highlights Jesus' parable teachings, his healing ministry, and his calling of disciples. Disciples were necessary for continuing Jesus' work after his death (Neuman 26). Christ's suffering and crucifixion make up the last and most significant events of his life; his death gives witness to his full humanity (Neuman 26).

Later in his work, Neuman discusses several images of Christ that have appeared in Catholic Christology. He focuses on four major images: Incarnate Word of God, Divine Bridegroom of the Soul, Suffering Crucified Savior, and Divine Savior. Each of these images probably affected Tolkien's perspective on Christ in some way, but I would consider Suffering Crucified Savior and Divine Savior to have the strongest reflections in *The Lord of the Rings*. The Suffering Crucified Savior image emphasizes that Christ

understands human pain and suffering (Neuman 68). The image of the Divine Savior confirms that Jesus came with a specific plan to set up the Church through his disciples (Neuman 69). I will explore the reflections of these images further in my analysis of Tolkien's characters.

The two natures of Christ also inform the Catholic worldview. In *The Riddle of Roman Catholicism*, Jaroslav Pelikan articulates the Doctrine of the Two Swords of the Church. One sword is temporal and one is spiritual. The Church has the authority to exercise the spiritual sword but usually depends on temporal authorities to exercise the temporal sword (*Riddle* 95). He explains, "There are two swords because there are twin realms, the spiritual and the temporal" (*Riddle* 95). These two realms are completely separate but they both owe their existence to God and are governed by the one true God (95). Just like the one person of Jesus contained both full humanity and full divinity, the spiritual and the temporal realms are both under the one God's domain. As a Roman Catholic, Tolkien probably envisioned the world according to this dichotomy, as is revealed through the images in his writings.

***The Lord of the Rings* Basics**

"In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit"—so begins *The Hobbit*, Tolkien's first published adventures into the lives of Gandalf, Bilbo, and the wonderful creatures of Hobbiton (1). This work seems to have been the first of J.R.R.'s writings to really grab the attention of the public. *The Hobbit* was published in 1937 and gained some renown in the United Kingdom and the United States as a children's story. Tolkien's delightful new creatures and descriptions of his fantasy world of Middle Earth enchanted these audiences. This tale also contains the first appearance of the powerful One Ring and the creature Gollum who would play such a pivotal role in Tolkien's next work.

The Hobbit begins with the sudden appearance of the old wizard Gandalf accompanied by a troop of dwarves. Gandalf convinces the hobbit Bilbo to join the troop on their adventure to reclaim the Lonely Mountain and its treasures from the dragon Smaug. Bilbo and the dwarves encounter many dangers during this quest but are conveniently saved by Gandalf. At one point, Bilbo becomes separated from the group and finds himself lost in goblin tunnels where he stumbles across a mysterious ring. He then encounters the creature Gollum with whom he undertakes a game of riddles and wins. Gollum lets Bilbo go without harming him, unaware that Bilbo has Gollum's magic ring in his possession. The magic ring, which turns the wearer invisible, is not described in *The Hobbit* as the powerful One Ring containing great evil, but Tolkien made this connection for readers as *The Lord of the Rings* developed.

The Hobbit also contains the first mention of the powerful sorcerer Sauron, who will become the great evil threat of *The Lord of the Rings*, but in the rest of *The Hobbit* he is fairly inconsequential to this story. Bilbo and the dwarves go on to defeat the dragon

Smaug and win back the vast fortune hidden in the Lonely Mountain. *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* picks up nearly 60 years later when Bilbo chooses to leave his home again, this time permanently. His much younger cousin Frodo inherits all of his possessions, including the magic ring. Around the time that Bilbo leaves home, the wizard Gandalf begins to suspect the ring is much more powerful than he had originally thought. After many years of researching the possible connection between the lost One Ring of the enemy and the ring Bilbo found in Gollum's cave, Gandalf finally confirms that the two rings are one and the same.

Gandalf explains the history and danger of the One Ring to Frodo, who decides then to transport the ring to the elvish kingdom of Rivendell in order to save his homeland from imminent danger. With the help of his hobbit friends and the ranger Strider, Frodo narrowly makes it to Rivendell alive. There a great council is held to determine the fate of the One Ring. Representatives from several kingdoms of men, dwarves, and elves come together to build the resistance against Sauron's growing power. The council decides the One Ring must be destroyed where it was made, inside Sauron's own land. Frodo again volunteers for this most perilous task and several others consent to join him and aid his quest. The company sets off together and faces many battles along the way, losing both Gandalf and the man Boromir. *The Fellowship of the Ring* concludes with the breaking of the fellowship, when Frodo and Sam resolve to continue on alone to the land of the Enemy, Mordor.

The Two Towers opens with Boromir's death after the battle with the enemy army. This volume of the Trilogy covers the separate storylines of Sam and Frodo's journey to Mordor, Merry and Pippin's fortunes after their capture and escape from the

Orc army, and Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas' trials with the men of Rohan and the battle of Helm's deep. *The Two Towers* also sees Gandalf return from death as Gandalf the White. His increased power helps the allied forces defeat the evil wizard Saruman and save the Kingdom of Rohan from destruction. Frodo and Sam, on their way to Mordor, encounter and tame the creature Gollum who becomes their guide to the evil land.

The trilogy's conclusion, *The Return of the King*, involves a great battle between the forces of Mordor and the two kingdoms of men. On the other side of the story, Frodo and Sam finally make it into Mordor. Through the combined efforts of Frodo and Gollum, the One Ring is destroyed. Sauron is defeated and Mordor falls, the armies of evil scattered across Middle Earth. The human kingdom of Gondor is restored to its former glory as Aragorn, the heir of the lost kings, reclaims his throne. The four hobbits return home to the Shire and save it from the lurking evil of Saruman's last stand. Later, Frodo, Gandalf, Bilbo, and several others sail across the sea to the Grey Heavens, leaving Middle Earth forever.

The Context of *The Lord of the Rings*

As previously mentioned, *The Hobbit* gained Tolkien some popularity in both the United Kingdom and the United States. Based on his success and the response of his audience, Tolkien thought it necessary to work on a sequel to the piece, which his publishers encouraged. Tolkien notes in a letter to C.A. Furth of Allen & Unwin in late 1937 that he had already written the first chapter of the sequel (*Letters* 27). By February of the next year, he was already expressing difficulty with developing the piece, fearing he had squandered too much of the intrigue of Middle Earth on *The Hobbit* to write a substantial sequel (*Letters* 29). The sequel would develop into something much darker, much longer, and much more involved than Tolkien had originally expected. He realized in early 1939 that unlike *The Hobbit* it would not be much of a children's piece. The piece's darker nature was made particularly clear with the appearance of the first Black Rider, whom Tolkien describes as "very alarming" (*Letters* 42).

Tolkien would continue to work on *The Lord of the Rings* up until its publication in 1954 and 1955. During this 17-year period of writing and revising his story about a great battle between good and evil, Tolkien's Great Britain would struggle in its own battles during World War II. The threat and peril that infused everyday life during this time in England would affect the tone of Tolkien's work. For this reason, several critics accused Tolkien of allegorizing World War II in *The Lord of the Rings*. He consistently denied any direct correlation between the events of the war and the developments in this plot, however, claiming that, "the last two books were written between 1944 and 48. That of course does not mean that the main idea of the story was a war-product" (*Letters*

216). He asserted in 1956, "Of course my story is not an allegory of Atomic power, but of *Power* (exerted for Domination)" (*Letters* 246).

Though the story may not have been an allegory of the war, the events of war certainly bore on Tolkien's mind during this time. His son Christopher became a soldier during World War II and Tolkien would mail him new draft pages on the front. He worried about his son greatly during these times, unhappy with the conflict of World War II:

> I sometimes feel appalled at the thought of the sum total of human misery all over the world at the present moment…If anguish were visible, almost the whole of this benighted planet would be enveloped in a dense dark vapour. (*Letters* 76)

In one of his letters to his son, he correlates *The Lord of the Rings* to the conflict of World War II, claiming, "You can't fight the Enemy with his own Ring without turning into an Enemy; but unfortunately Gandalf's wisdom seems long ago to have passed with him into the True West…" (*Letters* 94). He notes that allied opinions had begun to call out for the extermination of the German people, calling them evil and immoral (*Letters* 93). Tolkien seemed to believe the allied front was dangerously close to succumbing to the same evil of power that Germany had. He said the allies had no right to call the Germans out as vermin just like the Germans had no right to declare the Jews and Poles as such (*Letters* 93). While he may not have based the plot on the events of World War II, he had no problem relating the lessons imparted in his work to the issue of war.

Tolkien used his own work to comment on the danger mankind faced during struggles for power and domination. The context of World War II would have shaped the development of the plot just as it shaped Tolkien's consciousness. As Tolkien struggled to understand the conflict engaging the world, he would have been driven to consider his

own opinions about mankind's battle with power. The hope of his fantasy world was wrapped up in the task of a seemingly insignificant and powerless figure, Frodo Baggins. Though Frodo's sacrifice would ultimately save Middle Earth from the evil of Sauron just as Jesus Christ's sacrifice saved humanity from sin and death, mankind was responsible for resisting the temptation of power for themselves.

Gandalf and Frodo According to Tolkien

From Tolkien's letters, we can also gain some insight into how he thought of his characters and which of their characteristics he chose to emphasize. For my purposes, I would like to consider specifically what he wrote about Gandalf and Frodo. He describes Gandalf as wise, strong, powerful, resourceful, and at times, foresighted. When Tolkien speaks of Gandalf's origins, he says he is an incarnate being from the heavenly realm, not a human being. Gandalf is incarnate in the form of a wizard and wizards face all of the temptations that accompany incarnate flesh. His wisdom and good nature allow him to resist the temptation for power that the wizards face. Tolkien says, "Gandalf alone fully passes the tests, on a moral plane anyway…" (*Letters* 202). He is characterized as the one incarnate being in Middle Earth capable of truly opposing the forces of evil. Gandalf's purpose as a wizard is to encourage the native enemies of Sauron so that Middle Earth might be saved from his evil. For this reason, Tolkien says Gandalf's opposite is Sauron.

Tolkien draws specific attention to Gandalf's sacrificial act in *The Fellowship of the Ring* and his resurrection in *The Two Towers*. He explains Gandalf's decision to lay down his life in defense of his companions as "a humbling and abnegation of himself in conformity with 'the Rules'" (*Letters* 202). Gandalf humbles himself, giving up hope of personal success and setting aside his great power in the hopes that the mission of the company will succeed. When Gandalf sacrifices himself to the Balrog, he dies alone on the mountaintop. But his act is accepted by the greater powers beyond Middle Earth, of the heavenly realm, and he is sent back to Middle Earth with enhanced powers to finish his task. He is reincarnated as the more powerful Gandalf the White and claims of

himself that "none of you have any weapons that could hurt me" (*The Two Towers* 484). This sign of strength arguably recalls the arisen form of Christ.

Frodo, on the other hand, is described as innocent, pure-hearted, merciful, and selfless. He inherits the One Ring from Bilbo and chooses to take the task upon himself to destroy it, a selfless act. His pure heart is the key to resisting the temptation of the Ring for so long. His merciful and forgiving nature impacts his relationship with Gollum who becomes Frodo and Sam's guide to Mordor. Tolkien claims that, "the 'salvation' of the world and Frodo's own 'salvation' is achieved by his previous *pity* and forgiveness of injury" (*Letters* 234). Without Frodo's forgiveness and sparing of Gollum, Frodo's ultimate task would have failed.

Tolkien characterizes Frodo further as an instrument of Providence; his task is to do his best at carrying the weight of the One Ring (*Letters* 326). As for his self-sacrifice, Tolkien says Frodo undertakes his treacherous journey out of love and a desire to save the world from the evil of Sauron (*Letters* 327). His act is ultimately selfless because he accepts his task at his own expense. Like Gandalf, Tolkien also describes Frodo's quest and self-sacrifice as a sign of his humility because Frodo recognized "that he was wholly inadequate to the task" (*Letters* 327). Although he succumbs to the power of the One Ring in the final moments of his journey, he fails simply because Tolkien believes no mortal would have been able to resist the ring at this point. Tolkien explains that his failure is not a moral one but instead a simple failure of his mind and body. He says,

> His humility (with which he began) and his sufferings were justly rewarded by the highest honour; and his exercise of patience and mercy towards Gollum gained him Mercy: his failure was redressed. (*Letters* 326)

Frodo's continual acts of humility and mercy counteract his failure in the end.

Gandalf as an Embodiment of the Divine Aspect of Christ

To build my case for Christ symbolism in *The Lord of the Rings*, I will focus on the following aspects of the two main characters I have selected: their Christ-like character traits, their role in Middle Earth, the major plot events they participate in, and their relationships with other characters. Each of these categories will help me establish a connection between the character and Christ and demonstrate how the character represents either a divine or human representation of Christ.

Gandalf's role in Middle Earth, which Tolkien makes quite clear through his letters, is to aid the resistance against Sauron, the great evil attempting to take control of Middle Earth. While God is never specifically mentioned in *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf explains that he has been "sent" to Middle Earth in this incarnate form (*Two Towers* 491). Like Christ, Gandalf has been sent from another realm, incarnate in a physical being, and tasked with the destruction of evil. Gandalf's preexistence in another form is one of the strongest correlations to Christ's divinity, which is described in John 1:14, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us." The divine Christ dwells in heaven with God from the beginning of time and is incarnate in a physical form when he is sent into the world.

Gandalf's general task may be to stir forces of resistance against Sauron but his greatest and final task, as put forth by the Elf Lord Elrond, will be leading the fellowship to Mordor in order to destroy the One Ring. Elrond says, "With you and your faithful servant, Gandalf will go; for this shall be his great task, and maybe the end of his labours" (*Fellowship* 289). Gandalf's work will end with the destruction of the One Ring like Christ's work ends with the destruction of the power of sin and death. Gandalf is not

able to leave Middle Earth until the One Ring and Sauron are destroyed as evidenced by his return in *The Two Towers*: "Naked I was sent back—for a brief time, until my task is done" (491).

Gandalf is one of Tolkien's most interesting characters because of his contrasting characteristics. He is at once kind and merciful, full of anger and feared, a leader and an advisor, unwelcomed by those he helps, knowledgeable but reluctant for power, prophetic yet mysterious, and difficult to know. When Gandalf arrives on the scene of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, he is described as an old man driving alone (33). He is famous around Hobbiton for his fireworks and simple magic, but his true business is unknown to the hobbits (*Fellowship* 33). Pippin says in *Return of the King* that he has known Gandalf all of his life, "But there is much to read in that book, and I cannot claim to have seen more than a page or two" (744). Despite knowing Gandalf for many years and traveling with him throughout the story, Pippin still feels as though there is much to Gandalf he still has not seen. Aragorn also describes Gandalf's mysterious ways when he claims that he "still speak[s] in riddles" (485). Gandalf's followers see him as mysterious and difficult to know, always speaking in prophecies and riddles they cannot understand. Similarly, Christ's disciples never seem to catch on to his true purpose on earth. He speaks in prophecies about his death and teaches in parables that the disciples do not seem to understand. Part of Christ's divinity involves communicating the message from God which humans often have difficulty understanding. Gandalf is equally responsible for spreading a message in Middle Earth.

Part of Christ's divine mission on earth was to demonstrate God's merciful nature. He did this by healing the outcasts in society and sparing the sinful and accused.

Gandalf also performs several healing acts and speaks about sparing those whom society would normally not. Gandalf seems to be constantly gracious and forgiving. Although Saruman betrays him and attempts to imprison him, Gandalf later gives Saruman the chance to turn away from his evil ways. Pippin also disobeys Gandalf when he takes the Palantir, a seeing-stone used for communication between lands, from Gandalf's arms in the middle of the night. Pippin puts the company in great danger by exposing himself to Sauron, yet Gandalf is still forgiving of Pippin's defiance. Gandalf is most notably forgiving of the creature Gollum. Gollum has committed murder and also provided Sauron with information to find the One Ring, yet Gandalf constantly warns others not to harm him. He says, "I have not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it…My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end" (69). In spite of Gollum's malicious actions, Gandalf imparts hope that he may be cured of the power of the Ring and lend a hand in its destruction.

On the other hand, Gandalf is revealed many times to be quick to anger and full of wrath. Gandalf claims in *The Fellowship of the Ring* that the black riders, Sauron's evil huntsmen, "drew away from me, for they felt the coming of my anger and they dared not face it while the Sun was in the sky" (277). His anger is coupled with his great power, power that makes him revered in Middle Earth. For instance, in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, he says that he alone is a good enough reason for the elves to make a feast. Gimli refers to his head as "sacred" after his return from the dead in *The Two Towers* (492) and his is characterized as the greatest rider in *The Return of the King* (802). Christ is also valued for his great powers, as evidenced in his ability to heal great illnesses. Many around Galilee seek out Christ to heal their family members or themselves. The power

these figures hold demonstrates their connection to the divine. Jesus even claims that he has been given his authority and power from God in Matthew 9. Gandalf's power similarly comes from divine authority outside of Middle Earth.

While Christ's healing powers were revered, he was also rejected for his prophetic teachings. For instance, he said "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown" (Luke 4:24). Christ would ultimately be rejected by his own people and given over for execution. Gandalf faces comparable rejection from those he tries to help. In Hobbiton, he is labeled a disturber of the peace after Bilbo leaves his home (49). When Gandalf enters Rohan to warn King Theoden of Saruman's deception, a servant calls him Gandalf Stormcrow, meaning he always brings bad news. The servant says, "But truth to tell your welcome is doubtful here, Master Gandalf. You have ever been a herald of woe" (*Two Towers* 501). Gandalf, like Christ, is unwelcome even though he is trying to offer counsel and aide to the troubled nation.

Also similar to Christ, Gandalf is known to be full of wisdom. Galileans flocked to listen to Jesus preach beside the sea or on a hill, seeking his advice for how to live a good and faithful life. Jesus leads a company of men, the disciples, whom he educates in his ways of life and his message. In parallel images, Gandalf is often pictured as the leader of the company, the one to whom everyone turns for guidance. He leads the fellowship until his fall in Moria, he leads the men of Rohan out of the battle of Helm's Deep, and he takes over the kingdom of Gondor when Sauron's armies attack the city of Minas Tirith. He acts in the role of advisor for several important leaders and also for Frodo, which I will discuss further when describing Gandalf's relationships with other characters. Jesus' divinity gave him the ability to lead his followers with authority;

Gandalf's leadership contributes to his role as representative of the divine aspect of Christ in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Another way of assessing Gandalf's strength as a Christ figure is to draw comparisons between the major plot points of the story and the major events in Christ's life. Some of the most significant events in the gospel include his general ministry and leadership, the last supper with his disciples, Judas' betrayal, his imprisonment and crucifixion, death and resurrection, and establishment of the church. Several episodes in the plot line of *The Lord of the Rings* parallel these momentous events in the life of Christ, though they may not occur in the same order.

One of the first Christ-like experiences Gandalf has is his betrayal and imprisonment by the wizard Saruman in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Saruman is not a follower of Gandalf like Judas was of Jesus, but they are members of the same wizard order set with the same task of helping Middle Earth. Saruman uses another wizard, Radagast the Brown, to lure Gandalf to his fortress of Isengard. When Gandalf arrives seeking Saruman's aid and advice about the One Ring, Saruman reveals his true desire to capture the Ring for himself. He has turned away from his real purpose of protecting the world in favor of a selfish quest for power. He has betrayed Gandalf's trust. Gandalf refuses to submit to Saruman's request to join him in taking the Ring and is subsequently imprisoned on top of the tower Orthanc. Christ is comparably betrayed by someone he trusts, someone who is supposed to share the same motivations for spreading God's message. Judas acts on selfish motivations, not for power but for money in one Gospel account.

Part of Gandalf's ministry that could be seen as Christ-like is his role in the Council of Elrond. Gandalf acts as an advisor, helping the company of free peoples of Middle Earth to decide the fate of the One Ring. His knowledge of the One Ring and its power is crucial to the Council's discussions. Upon his advice, the Council decides the Ring must be destroyed completely, once and for all. Christ functions in a related role for his disciples, providing information and guidance that helps them reach important decisions about Jewish law. Mark 3:14 says, "He appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons." He calls them to a specific purpose, like Gandalf calls for the One Ring to be destroyed.

Recalling the image of the Divine Savior highlighted by Matthias Neuman, we can see Gandalf take on this role leading the company in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. The image of the Divine Savior paints Christ as a savior who came with the specific plan of setting up a church. After the fellowship sets out from Rivendell to destroy the One Ring, Gandalf leads the group with a clear direction. At times the company must adjust its course because of unforeseen obstacles, but they always look to Gandalf to select the path. While the members of the fellowship might not understand or know of Gandalf's plan, they trust in his leadership. Similarly, the disciples did not seem to comprehend Christ's ultimate plan but they followed his directions.

Gandalf leads the fellowship into the Mines of Moria where they face a great enemy, a balrog. The balrog is described as "like a great shadow, in the middle of which was a dark form, of man-shape maybe, yet greater" (*Fellowship* 344). This enemy is wreathed in flame and carries a large sword and whip. Sending the fellowship across the

Bridge of Khazadum toward safety, Gandalf stands alone on the bridge to oppose the balrog. This image of Gandalf parallels that of Christ, hanging alone on the cross to conquer sin. Gandalf sacrifices his own power and his staff in order to break the bridge and prevent the balrog's crossing. But he also sacrifices himself when the balrog's whip catches his foot and pulls him down into the abyss. Like Christ, Gandalf is willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of the ultimate plan, destroying the One Ring and evil.

His fall from the bridge is fatal; the fellowship must continue on without Gandalf, yet they still rely on what they knew of his plans to direct them. Gandalf unexpectedly and miraculously returns in *The Two Towers*. In the gospel of John, Jesus' resurrection is so unexpected that his disciples do not recognize him when they see his new form. Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas mistake Gandalf's resurrected form for the fallen wizard Saruman. Gandalf reveals himself to his followers as Gandalf the White; he is cloaked in all white and his hair has turned white, as opposed to the gray he was previously known for (*Two Towers* 483). He informs his followers, "I have passed through fire and deep water, since we parted" (*Two Towers* 484). He explains that he struggled with the balrog after his fall, smote this enemy, and then died on the mountainside. Gandalf is sent back in this greater form to finish the task he was originally incarnated for. Christ too returns from the dead to insure that his final goal as the Divine Savior, establishing the Church, is achieved.

Gandalf's new and more formidable form gives him the ability to break the power of his enemies. Like Christ who has broken the power of sin and death, Gandalf can now break Saruman's spell over mankind. After the battle of Helm's Deep where the people of Rohan defeat Saruman's armies, Gandalf takes a small contingent of their leaders to

confront Saruman at Isengard. Saruman attempts to bewitch the company of men into pardoning his actions. Gandalf gives Saruman one last chance to repent of his evil choices and give up his power freely, but Saruman refuses. With his new power, Gandalf casts Saruman out of the wizard order and breaks his staff, stripping all authority from his enemy (*Two Towers* 569).

Facing the balrog and breaking Saruman's powers are not the only times Gandalf stands alone against a great enemy. As representative of the divine aspect of Christ, Gandalf alone has the strength and authority to stand against the forces of evil. He is twice more the opponent who stands between evil and mankind in *The Return of the King*: when he faces the Witch King at the gate of Gondor and speaks to the Mouth of Sauron at the black gate. His authority as an incarnate being sent to Middle Earth and the new force gained through his resurrection give Gandalf this ability to combat evil alone.

In his final Christ-like event, Gandalf imparts the dominion over Middle Earth to mankind after Sauron is defeated. When Christ returns from the dead, he passes the responsibility and care of the world over to his disciples. In Matthew 28:19-20 he commands, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." He ascends to heaven and leaves the establishment of the Church and the spread to his message to his disciples. Similarly, Gandalf pronounces, "You must settle its affairs for yourselves, that is what you have been trained for…My time is over: it is no longer my task to set things to rights, nor to help folk to do so" (*Return* 974). Gandalf makes it clear to all his followers that his task is done and his time is over. He is passing responsibility for the care of Middle Earth over to mankind and the

other free people. Like Christ, Gandalf is prepared to leave Middle Earth and so he must give his duties over to those who will remain.

Gandalf's role as representative of the divine aspect of Christ is also accentuated through his relationships to other characters, most notably with Frodo, Saruman, and Aragorn. If Gandalf and Frodo are meant to represent the dual sides of Christ's nature, one might assume the two would be connected by interdependence. The fates of Gandalf and Frodo certainly seem intertwined throughout the story although they spend most of pages of the series separated. Gandalf cannot touch the One Ring, fearing his ability to resist its power (*Fellowship* 71). Recalling God's inability to look on sin, Gandalf begs Frodo not to tempt him with the Ring. It is Christ's incarnate humanity that allows him to take on the sins of the world; Frodo, in his humanity, is able to carry the One Ring. In his great presence on Middle Earth, Gandalf would be unable to destroy the One Ring himself. He is dependent on Frodo to complete the actual task. Without Frodo to bear the One Ring to Mordor, Gandalf's assignment in Middle Earth might never have been complete.

Frodo is dependent on Gandalf for guidance and wisdom. Perhaps it is the divinity in Gandalf that makes him so prophetic and wise. Frodo attempts to give the One Ring over to Gandalf, knowing that Gandalf possesses far greater power than himself. Although Frodo bears the physical burden of the Ring, Gandalf joins the fellowship in order to provide direction Frodo needs. He says to Frodo after the Council of Elrond, "Someone said that intelligence would be needed in the party. He was right. I think I shall come with you" (*Fellowship* 286). His prophetic wisdom is his greatest contribution to destroying the Ring.

Even after Gandalf falls in Moria, Frodo seems reliant on Gandalf's advice to find his way. Frodo and Sam both express constant wishes that Gandalf were with them or that they would have known where he was leading them. When Frodo faces one of his greatest temptations to expose the Ring to Sauron, Frodo hears an opposing voice compelling him to remove the Ring from his finger. After his return in *The Two Towers*, Gandalf admits to being this voice of reason: "Very nearly it was revealed to the Enemy, but it escaped. I had some part in that: for I sat in a high place, and I strove with the Dark Tower; and the Shadow passed" (484). Even from far away, Gandalf's influence is crucial for Frodo's success.

The two characters are further intertwined because they ultimately share the burden of destroying the Ring. Gandalf assures Frodo from the very beginning, "I will help you bear this burden, as long as it is yours to bear" (*Fellowship* 71). In sharing the load, both characters seem equally physically affected by its weight. Frodo notices at the beginning of *The Fellowship of the Ring* that "the old wizard looked unusually bent, almost as if he was carrying a great weight" (50). Frodo will later face the Ring's overwhelming force pulling him down, forcing him to crawl on hands and knees to the peak of Mount Doom. The physical struggle of both of these characters mirrors perfectly Jesus' battle to carry the burden of the cross all the way to his crucifixion.

Saruman acts as the instrument of temptation for Gandalf. This relationship is critical for Gandalf's rise to power. Saruman is originally the White wizard, but after his fall from grace, Gandalf ascends to this title. As with Christ's narrative, Gandalf's rise to greatness is assisted by another person's submission to evil. Without Judas' betrayal, Jesus would not have been crucified. This negative action helps him to come to terms

with his fate: dying on the cross. Before the betrayal, Christ deals with temptation in the garden of Gethsemane, praying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me," (Matthew 26:39). In the moment of his hesitation, Judas' action sets his fate in motion. Similarly, Gandalf originally goes to Isengard seeking Saruman's advice and help. Gandalf has finally confirmed that the ring Bilbo found in Gollum's cave is actually the One Ring of Sauron but he is unsure of what action to take. When Saruman confronts him with his true intentions to take the Ring, he says, "But we must have power, power to order all things as we will, for that good which only the Wise can see" (272). Despite his previous hesitations and uncertainty, Saruman's words convince Gandalf of the right course of action. Seeing how lust for the Ring has corrupted even the wisest of the wizard order, Gandalf realizes no one can resist the power of the Ring so it must be destroyed to save Middle Earth. Saruman's betrayal stirs Gandalf to act for the Ring's final destruction.

The most critical relationship that reflects Gandalf's Christ-like character is his relationship to Aragorn. Aragorn is the heir to the fallen kingdom of Gondor, wandering Middle Earth as a ranger. While Aragorn will eventually redeem Gondor, he would not succeed without Gandalf's help. Aragorn is a great leader himself, helping Frodo make it to Rivendell, leading the fellowship after Gandalf falls, commanding armies in both the Battle of Helm's Deep and the Battle of Pelennor Fields. Despite his great leadership, Aragorn always willingly submits himself to Gandalf, preferring to follow Gandalf's guidance and encouraging others to do so also. Aragorn becomes a submissive, faithful follower when Gandalf is present. He seeks Gandalf's advice and constantly turns others to Gandalf for help. In the Mines of Moria, he assures the company, "[Gandalf] will not

go astray—if there is any path to find. He has led us in here against our fears, but he will lead us out again, at whatever cost to himself" (*Fellowship* 324-25). Aragorn trusts Gandalf above all others. When Gandalf falls on the bridge, Aragorn steps up to lead the fellowship, but he follows the path Gandalf had set out for them.

Aragorn's loyalty and dependence on Gandalf seem fairly similar to the disciples' dependence on Jesus. At the end of *The Return of the King*, when Aragorn assumes the throne of Gondor, he has Gandalf crown him. This action constitutes an official passage of the divine power to mankind. Aragorn becomes responsible for caring for Middle Earth and governing Gondor just like Peter becomes responsible for establishing and leading the Church. In John 21: 15-17, Jesus repetitively tells Peter to "feed my lambs…tend my sheep…feed my sheep." In an analogous scene, Gandalf takes Aragorn up on the Mountain top just outside of Gondor. He shows him his vast realm and commands, "The Third Age of the world is ended, and the new age is begun; and it is your task to order its beginning and to preserve what may be preserved" (*Return* 949). He leads Aragorn to find the new sapling tree, a symbol of the blooming vitality of Aragorn's kingdom, redeemed from the dying tree of old. Like Christ's establishment of the Church, Gandalf assists in the formation of the new kingdoms of men, ensuring the world is cared for beyond his time. The kingdoms of men are dependent on the authority of Gandalf, as representative of the divine aspect of Christ, to establish their reign.

Frodo as an Embodiment of the Human Aspect of Christ

Frodo shares a few important Christ-like attributes with Gandalf, namely his merciful and self-sacrificial nature. While for Gandalf these qualities might culminate in a singular action such as sacrificing himself on the Bridge of Khazadum, Frodo must keep these virtues in constant practice. Also like Gandalf, Frodo's character is wrapped in an air of mystery. He was raised by Bilbo, the only hobbit in Hobbiton to ever leave the Shire, when his parents died at a young age. He calls Bilbo an uncle although the two are really cousins. When Bilbo leaves the Shire for the second and final time, he bequeaths his belongings to Frodo along with his magic ring. Along with Bag End, Frodo seems to have inherited Bilbo's reputation for strangeness, taking counsel with bizarre folk like the wizard Gandalf (*Fellowship* 32).

Christ is seen as the unexpected Messiah, born to a humble family, raised as a carpenter's son. This humility contributes to his humanness. He does not come into the world as a great king but as a lowly carpenter so that he might identify with everyman's sufferings. The image of the Suffering Crucified Savior presented by Matthias Neuman accentuates just that fact: Christ participated in a fully human form so that he might share in our pain and struggles. Tolkien offers us a parallel image in the character of Frodo. Hobbits are simple creatures, known not to travel beyond their lands or deal in the affairs of others outside of their race. But Frodo takes on the burden of the Ring not just for the sake of his own people but also for the whole of Middle Earth. At the Council of Elrond, Boromir questions, "And how has it passed down the years, until it is brought hither by so strange a messenger?" (*Fellowship* 262). Frodo is cast as the unexpected savior, the unforeseen hero. Several others remark at Frodo's strange ability to resist the power of

the Ring and his unique courage for a hobbit. Similar to the lowly carpenter's son, there is much more to Frodo than meets the eye (*Fellowship* 291).

Like Christ, Frodo's role in Middle Earth is as the chosen one; he is fated for self-sacrifice. After Jesus' death, his followers were quick to attribute many of the old Messianic prophecies to him, claiming his life as a fulfillment of prophecy. Boromir shares a prophetic dream with the Council of Elrond in the *Fellowship of the Ring*: "*Seek the Sword that was broken:/In Imladris it dwells;/There shall be counsels taken/Stronger than Morgul-spells./There shall be shown a token/That Doom is near at hand,/For Isildur's Bane shall waken,/And the Hafling Forth shall stand*" (259). This is a prediction of Frodo stepping up to accept the burden of the Ring. Just like Christ, Frodo's life is a fulfillment of prophecy.

Beyond token dreams and divinations, Frodo alone seems chosen for the task of carrying the One Ring to Mordor. Gandalf alludes to this at the very beginning of the story, claiming, "I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and *not* by its maker. In which case you also were *meant* to have it" (*Fellowship* 65). Gandalf speaks of a divine plan for Frodo's life. Elrond will echo these sentiments further into the story: "I think that this task is appointed for you, Frodo; and that if you do not find a way, no one will" (*Fellowship* 284). The life of Christ appears fated for self-sacrifice and he tells his disciples of this purpose in Mark 10:45: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Christ would forfeit his human life by dying on the cross; Frodo surrenders his life to carry the One Ring into Mordor.

Christ showed moments of reluctance in accepting his fate, most notably demonstrated through his prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane. Frodo exhibits similar hesitance when agreeing to carry the Ring both to Rivendell and to Mordor. He says, "I wish I had never seen the Ring! Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?" (*Fellowship* 70). Originally, he tries to get Gandalf to take the Ring, trusting Gandalf's wisdom and strength. But when Gandalf refuses, Frodo accepts the perilous task at hand. Frodo is also reluctant to volunteer himself at the Council of Elrond. When the time comes, "An overwhelming longing to rest and remain at peace by Bilbo's side in Rivendell filled all his heart. At last with an effort he spoke…." (*Fellowship* 284). Just before accepting the burden, Frodo is wishing that he could remain safely in Rivendell and avoid any more adventures. I would argue that both Christ's and Frodo's hesitancy to undertake their dangerous tasks highlights their humanity.

As I discussed previously with Gandalf, the burden of the Ring affects Frodo physically. His physical toils parallel the weight of the cross on Christ, who carries the cross to his crucifixion place in John 19. As *The Two Towers* describes,

> In fact with every step towards the gates of Mordor Frodo felt the Ring on its chain about his neck grow more burdensome. He was now beginning to feel it as an actual weight dragging him earthwards (616).

As Sam and Frodo get nearer to Mordor, the Ring begins to drag Frodo downward. Bringing to mind the image of the Suffering Crucified Savior, "Frodo's head was bowed, his burden was dragging him down again" (*Two Towers* 688). As representative of the human aspect of Christ, Frodo must struggle physically with his cargo in order for us to relate. Christ underwent bodily sufferings so he could identify with human suffering and pain; Frodo's troubles are equally necessary.

Other important Christ-like qualities Frodo possesses are his leadership abilities and his merciful, forgiving nature. When the hobbits take a detour through the Old Forest in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Frodo leads his companions with confidence. Later, in his interactions with Gollum, Sam sees Frodo grow into the image of a lord: "a tall stern shadow, a mighty lord who hid his brightness in grey cloud" (*Two Towers* 604). Frodo exhibits strong command over Gollum and leads by example. When Sam, Frodo, and Gollum find themselves in the company of the men of the West, Frodo requests to be blindfolded first so that Gollum can see that it is safe. Frodo would not expect Gollum to act in a trusting manner if he himself was incapable of it. His example is what convinces Gollum to acts appropriately. Similarly, Jesus calls others to give up their belongings and seek the kingdom of God. Christ leads by example by traveling with his disciples, without material goods and depending on the help of the community to get by. He teaches his disciples to be accepting of even the lowliest members of society. As a model, Jesus takes meals with the tax collectors and prostitutes, much to the Pharisees' scorn.

Christ's interactions with these outcastes also reveal his merciful nature. He says, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36). For instance, in John 8, the scribes and Pharisees bring an adulterous woman before Jesus and question him about how she should be punished. Jesus responds, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7). Christ teaches mercy for those whom society would punish and reject. Frodo acts in a similar manner towards Gollum because of Gandalf's wisdom. Despite Frodo's original belief that Gollum deserves death for his treachery and crimes, he chooses to spare Gollum when they encounter and trap him on

their journey. Frodo also prevents the men of the West from executing Gollum for entering the forbidden pool. His pity and mercy saves Gollum's life on many occasions and encourages Gollum to act as a loyal guide. Frodo is also merciful towards Saruman and Grima Wormtongue at the end of *The Return of the King*. In spite of the evil and fighting they have caused in the Shire, he tries to pardon their actions. He prevents the hobbits from executing Saruman and gives Grima the opportunity to turn away from Saruman's service.

Frodo's individual storyline contains several events that mimic the life of Christ. He faces temptation, betrayal, physical torment and suffering, imprisonment, and torture. Christ faces temptation in the wilderness in Matthew 4 when Satan appears and offers him food, power, and glory. Christ successfully resists all of these temptations and leaves the wilderness. Frodo's struggles stem from the temptation to wear the Ring and use its power. His tests come throughout his journey to Mordor, starting as soon as he leaves the Shire for Rivendell. When the first black rider appears in the story, the hobbits are extremely frightened and hide. In his fear, "[Frodo] hardly dared to breathe, and yet the desire to get it out of his pocket became so strong that he began slowly to move his hand" (*Fellowship* 84). Originally, he seems tempted to use the Ring to protect himself, but later he battles with the urge to take the Ring for its power. The Ring begins to possess him but Frodo is able to resist it all the way to Mount Doom. As representative of the human aspect of Christ, Frodo constantly fights the temptation of the Ring like humanity must combat the temptations of the flesh.

As the image of the Suffering Crucified Savior, Frodo must undergo several physical sufferings like Christ faces. Christ must face his pain and torments in order to

understand the toils of humanity. Before his "crucifixion" and imprisonment, Frodo is stabbed by ringwraiths, dragged into a lake by a dark creature, and speared by a troll. His encounter with the ringwraiths is particularly significant because it leaves a permanent scar on Frodo's body. In the gospel of John, Jesus reveals the permanent scars in his hands and side to his disciples. He says to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side" (John 20:28). The scars are a reminder of the suffering Christ underwent for mankind. Frodo's shoulder scar bothers him on the anniversary of his stabbing on Weathertop: he tells Sam two years after the event, "I am wounded…it will never really heal" (*Return* 1002). The pain of this scar serves as a constant reminder of the journey Frodo undertook to save Middle Earth.

Like Christ in the garden of Gethsemane, Frodo withdraws from the group at the end of *The Fellowship of the Ring* to meditate over his path. He tells the fellowship, "I know that haste is needed, yet I cannot choose. The burden is heavy. Give me an hour longer, and I will speak" (*Fellowship* 412). While he is away from the company, Boromir follows him and speaks with him. Boromir tempts Frodo to take the easier route, to delay to the journey into Mordor by taking the Ring to Gondor where it can be protected. This is a great moment of temptation for Frodo because he is given the option to pass off his burden to others. During this conversation, Frodo sees the negative effect the Ring has on others around him. Boromir attempts to seize the Ring and "His fair and pleasant face was hideously changed; a raging fire was in his eyes" (*Fellowship* 415). Witnessing the Ring's effect gives Frodo the resolve to head straight towards Mordor. As Christ praying in the garden, Frodo has also passed his final test of hesitance and gained a new firmness in his mission.

On some level, Boromir's actions could be considered a betrayal of trust. As a member of the fellowship, he is supposed to protect Frodo, aiding the destruction of the Ring at whatever the personal cost. Unfortunately, the power of the Ring lures Boromir into a momentary lapse of judgment, where he places his own desires ahead of what he knows is best for Frodo and the company. Boromir dies shortly after this episode, but not without first repenting and confessing to Aragorn his trespass against Frodo. In regards to Frodo as a Christ figure, Gollum commits the true Judas-like betrayal against him. This event occurs at the end of *The Two Towers*. Gollum has been acting loyally to Frodo as his master up until this point, but the evil of the Ring turns him malicious. He looks for an opportunity to betray Frodo into enemy hands so that he can take the Ring for himself.

Gollum's treachery and its consequences mirror very closely Judas' betrayal and Christ's subsequent imprisonment. When Christ is praying in the garden of Gethsemane before his trials begin, Judas leads "a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders" to find him (Mark 14: 43). In other gospels, these are Roman soldiers. Judas gives the sign to identify Jesus, making his arrest possible. A loyal follower of Christ's steps up to defend him: "But one of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear" (Mark 14:47). Jesus is arrested and taken to the high priests. His most loyal disciple, Peter, follows at a distance (Mark: 14:54). In *The Two Towers*, Gollum leads Sam and Frodo up a mountain pass into a tunnel, claiming it is a secret way into Mordor. Gollum goes into the tunnel first, but abandons Sam and Frodo in the dark. Inside the tunnel, a large, malicious, spider-like creature waits to capture the hobbits for food. Gollum's actions have left

Frodo defenseless, just like Christ in the garden. He has betrayed Frodo into enemy hands.

Sam and Frodo desperately try to escape the spider's lair, searching as fast as they can to find an exit. Once they are free on the other side of the tunnel, the spider catches up with them and attacks Frodo. The spider stabs Frodo with a venomous stinger that paralyzes him so that he appears dead. Sam rushes to his defense: "He sprang forward with a yell, and seized his master's sword, in his left hand. Then he charged" (*Two Towers* 711). Sam wounds the spider and she retreats to her lair. This event recalls the image of Christ's follower who cuts off the ear of a slave in his defense. But just as that follower's actions do not prevent Christ's arrest, Sam's aide comes too late. Frodo appears dead so Sam takes the burden of the Ring upon himself and abandons his master's body. Soon afterwards, a company of Orcs appears and spots the body; realizing Frodo is merely paralyzed, they drag him off to the dark tower, completing his Christ-like arrest. Sam recognizes his mistake and takes off after the Orcs: "He could not see anything ahead, for this new passage twisted and turned constantly; but he thought he was catching the two Orcs up" (*Two Towers* 724). Frodo's most loyal servant is following after his captors just like Peter follows after Christ.

Christ's capture continues with his trial and torture. He is questioned by Pontius Pilate and sentenced to death. Jesus is stripped, beaten, and mocked before his crucifixion. Once the soldiers crucify him, they take his personal belongings. Matthew 27:35 explains, "they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots." In an almost identical depiction, when Sam rescues Frodo from the dark tower, he finds him stripped and beaten. Sam can hear the crack of a whip and Frodo's screams before he

breaks into the prison chamber (*Two Towers* 889). He also overhears an Orc in the tower saying, "but a nice mess you two precious captains have made of things, fighting over the swag" (*Two Towers* 885). The Orcs were fighting over Frodo's clothes and personal belongings just like the soldiers battle over Jesus' clothes. When Sam actually finds Frodo, Frodo tells him, "They stripped me of everything; and then two great brutes came and questioned me" (*Two Towers* 890). He has endured a Christ-like torture and trial. Frodo's capture and persecution accentuate his role as representative of the human aspect of Christ; he is not invincible like Gandalf, whom no material weapon could injure (*Two Towers* 484).

Frodo's final act of self-sacrifice comes when he and Sam finally reach Mount Doom. He is supposed to cast the Ring into the fire but instead claims it for himself. As Tolkien explains in his letters, Frodo's failure is purely a result of his human frailty. No mortal could have resisted the power of the Ring inside the heart of Mount Doom and so Frodo is overcome by its influence. At this moment, Frodo's task seems to have failed. He submits to the Ring like Christ's human body surrenders to death. Gollum attacks Frodo and bites off his finger, taking back the Ring for himself. In Gollum's exhilaration, "he stepped too far, toppled, wavered for a moment on the brink, and then with a shriek he fell" (*Two Towers* 925). Judas also dies as a result of his treachery. In Acts, Judas falls and all of his internal organs burst from his body. With Gollum's last selfish act, the Ring is destroyed and the mission succeeds. Frodo is permanently scarred from this scuffle; his missing finger becomes another physical reminder of his journey in years to come.

After the War of the Ring and the crowning of King Aragorn, Frodo participates in the restoration of the Shire and passes on its care to his followers in a way that is similar to Gandalf's actions in Gondor. Restoring the Shire requires a battle to defeat Saruman's forces. Frodo does not actually fight in the battle but serves more in the role of peacemaker. He becomes the mayor of the Shire for a short time in order to establish peace among the hobbits. Like Christ names Peter as his successor, responsible for establishment of the Church, Frodo imparts his duties to Sam. Frodo has recorded the story of the War of the Ring in the book Bilbo gave to him, but he gives the book over to Sam, telling him, "I have quite finished, Sam…the last pages are for you" (*Return* 1004). Sam also becomes mayor of the Shire after Frodo's tenure and replants the scourged lands with soil from the Lady Galadriel. After his resurrection, Christ ascends into heaven. In a single moment of ascension, both Gandalf and Frodo sail out of Middle Earth to the Grey Havens. Together they are the complete Christ figure, leaving the care of the world to their followers.

Apart from his physical pains and sufferings, some of the strongest evidence paralleling Frodo to Christ comes through his relationships with other characters. As a representation of the human aspect of Christ, it follows that Frodo's most important connections would be to other beings in Middle Earth rather than a connection to divinity in another realm. Gandalf's relationships are more focused on representing the divine plan and enacting it. Gandalf seeks out individuals like Frodo and Aragorn to nurture so that they can act for him, ensuring that his ultimate goal is achieved. Frodo, on the other hand, engages companions who will simply assist him along his journey. Frodo's goal is much more nearsighted; he is not conscious of a divine plan, just of the task before him.

For this reason, Frodo's cohorts become aides to his quest rather than the direct instruments of his will.

As previously discussed, Gollum plays a very significant role in defining Frodo as a Christ-figure. Judas' actions were absolutely necessary to the establishment of the Church; his betrayal facilitated the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. Similarly, Gollum's treachery is essential to Frodo's success. Quite literally, without Gollum's malicious choices, Frodo would have failed to destroy the One Ring. Gollum and Judas are both selfishly motivated, seeking some personal material gain and setting aside their previous loyalty to their masters. For Judas, the gain is monetary; for Gollum, he desires merely to possess his precious Ring. Both Gollum and Judas act in a deceptive manner. Judas leads Christ's capturers directly to him and identifies his teacher with a friendly greeting. Gollum guides Frodo into a trap under the pretense of helping him reach Mordor. Gollum, like Judas, is a close follower of the one he betrays. His deception casts Frodo in a Christ-like light, given into enemy hands by a dishonest companion.

Another key individual in Christ's ministry is John the Baptist. The gospels speak of John the Baptist as Christ's predecessor, delivering a message of repentance and heralding Jesus' coming. In Mark 1:7, John proclaims, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stop down and untie the thong of his sandals." John essentially writes the first chapter of Christ's story, baptizing him into his ministry. Just as Jesus inherits his ministry from John, Frodo receives his burden from Bilbo. Bilbo has literally written the beginning of Frodo's story by recording his original adventure from *The Hobbit* in a book he gives to Frodo, the same book Frodo will later

pass on to Sam. Frodo is also symbolically baptized into his inheritance at Bilbo's 111st birthday party. At this time, Frodo is turning 33, an important age in a hobbit's life: "the date of his coming of age" (*Fellowship* 30). Bilbo announces in his birthday toast that Frodo, "comes of age and into his inheritance today" (*Fellowship* 38). After his speech, Bilbo disappears from the Shire, leaving behind his home and many of his possessions for Frodo. These possessions include the One Ring, marking the official beginning to Frodo's own story and quest.

Jesus calls his disciples out of their ordinary lives as fishermen (Mark 1:16-20). This loyal group of companions aids Christ's ministry and follows him around Palestine. Frodo also gathers followers who pledge their loyalty to him and his quest. Like the disciples, Frodo's companions do not initially understand the true nature of the task. Sam is excited to follow Frodo, exclaiming, "Me go and see the Elves and all! Hooray!" (*Fellowship* 73). Sam is enthusiastic about the prospect of traveling to an elven country, not recognizing the danger that lingers near. Later, once they do begin to realize the hazard of following Frodo, the company pledges their loyalty anyway. Merry assures Frodo, "We know the Ring is no laughing-matter; but we are going to do our best to help you against the enemy" (*Fellowship* 114). Aragorn also swears allegiance to Frodo, to help him despite the personal risk, as do all the members of the fellowship that forms after the Council of Elrond. Frodo's group of "disciples" help define him as a Christ figure.

Among any group of followers, however, there is always one individual who is the most loyal. For Christ that person was Peter. Peter was the first disciple Jesus called (Mark 1: 16). The two men are depicted as having a very close relationship; Peter is

constantly expressing his love for his master and teacher. Christ also clearly admires Peter, telling him, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). Jesus trusts Peter and imparts the continuation of Christ's mission to him. Peter is present at all of the important events of Christ's ministry, including his transfiguration, arrest, trial, and crucifixion. After Christ's resurrection, he commissions Peter to feed his metaphorical flock. In John 21 Jesus also predicts that Peter will suffer the same physical persecution Christ himself has endured; Jesus tells him: "But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go" (John 21:18). Peter is a crucial character in Christ's ministry.

Of Frodo's disciples, Sam is clearly the most loyal. Like Peter, he is Frodo's first companion and the most doting. Sam journeys with Frodo all the way from Hobbiton into Mordor, the only individual to suffer the same fate as Frodo. Sam is consistent in his affections and protection for Frodo; he will follow him to the greatest danger because of his deep love for Frodo. In an example of his loyalty, Sam watches over Frodo after he is stabbed by the ringwraith on Weathertop. As Frodo recovers in Rivendell, Gandalf informs him, "We have been terribly anxious, and Sam has hardly left your side, day or night, except to run messages" (*Fellowship* 233). Sam again makes his loyalty known at the end of the Council of Elrond by volunteering himself to accompany Frodo on his journey to Mordor. Elrond remarks to Sam, "You at least will go with him. It is hardly possible to separate you from him, even when he is summoned to a secret council and you are not" (*Fellowship* 284). Sam will not allow any distance between him and his master. After the fellowship leaves the elven realm of Lothlorien, Frodo makes his

decision to separate from the group and continue on alone. But even then, Sam runs after him and insists on going with him. The two set off for Mordor alone.

Sam shares the burden of the Ring, as Peter eventually faces his own crucifixion. Believing Frodo has died outside of the spider's lair, Sam decides to carry out Frodo's mission himself. He removes the Ring from Frodo's body, "and then he bent his own neck and put the chain upon it, and at once his head was bowed to the ground with the weight of the Ring, as if a great stone had been strung on him" (*Two Towers* 716). Sam deals with the same physical struggle Frodo has endured. In *The Return of the King*, Sam literally carries Frodo up the side of Mount Doom when Frodo cannot continue on (920). Without Sam's courage and strength, Frodo's mission would have failed. Consequently, Frodo gives Sam the red book containing their story and entrusts him with the care of the Shire, like Peter taking on the leadership of the Church. Sam has proven himself dependable and true. As a very Peter-like character, Sam helps to cast Frodo in a Christ-like image, as a strong leader worthy of love, loyalty, and sacrifice.

Conclusion

Each of the similarities between the story of Christ and Gandalf and Frodo's role in *The Lord of the Rings* points to the influence of Catholic Christology on J.R.R. Tolkien's writings. While I have discussed only these two characters and their important relationships in depth, *The Lord of the Rings* also contains strong themes that relate to a Christian life. The gospels provide us with stories of all the important facets of Christ's life, including his struggles with temptation, his sacrifice of love, and his redemption of mankind. Gandalf and Frodo both have either character traits or participate in events that mirror these components, but these parts can also be found in the general themes of the work.

Power and temptation together embody one of the greatest themes in *The Lord of the Rings*. The two main characters I discussed are not the only ones who deal with temptation caused by the power of the One Ring. The Ring's force seems to touch nearly every character throughout the work. Gollum, spellbound after years of possession of the One Ring, follows endlessly after Frodo just for a chance to hold the Ring again. Sam, as he takes up the Ring in Frodo's stead in Mordor, struggles with the desire to keep it for himself when he discovers Frodo is actually alive. The great Elf-Queen Galadriel also faces the lure of the Ring when Frodo presents it to her in Lothlorien; the Ring's strength entices her to make her own display of terror and domination before she passes her test of temptation. As Christ teaches his followers by example and parable, the individual must encounter temptation and must stand strong against it. Tolkien shows us both successful and failed attempts to withstand the power of the Ring.

Christ's sacrifice of love is the central theme of the gospels and is also a lesson he taught his disciples. He called his followers to give up their worldly possessions and persevere through persecution. Gandalf and Frodo are not the only characters in *The Lord of the Rings* who sacrifice themselves or their belongings for their love of Middle Earth. Boromir, regretting his attack on Frodo, sacrifices himself in order to protect the hobbits from capture by the Orc army at the end of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. All of the other members of the fellowship are similarly sacrificing their lives and homes to help Frodo in his quest. Sam makes the greatest sacrifice of all, following Frodo all the way to Mount Doom where death seems inevitable. Tolkien teaches the reader that self-sacrifice is a valuable part of human life as these actions help to bring about God's plan of good conquering evil in the world.

Tolkien's work also demonstrates the theme of the redemption of humankind. The gospels and the New Testament interpret Christ's sacrifice as an act of redemption and forgiveness. By giving up his life on earth, Christ grants humankind eternal life with God again, a privilege lost with the disobedience of Adam and Eve in Genesis. Throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf and Frodo help restore multiple fallen kingdoms. In *The Two Towers*, Gandalf empowers a spellbound King Theoden to lead his kingdom back to greatness as they fight for their lives against Saruman's army. With the ultimate defeat of Sauron near the end of *Return of the King*, Gandalf helps Aragorn reclaim the throne of his ancestors and replant the dead white tree. Frodo also helps restore his own home, the Shire, which has been torn apart by civil war because of Saruman's demonic influence. Despite the evils of power and corruption leading each of

these kingdoms astray, these men and hobbits are able to return to their former glory with the aide of the Christ figures.

Tolkien's Catholic faith was essential to his upbringing and several of his closest relationships. Though he claims he did not write *The Lord of the Rings* with any intentional religious symbolism, he acknowledges religion's influence on the story's development. By noting the powerful symbolism in the text, we are able to see how the gospel and Catholic theology are reflected in his work. Gandalf and Frodo serve as the two Christ figures of the piece, Gandalf representing Christ's divine nature and Frodo representing his humanity. Neither character embodies all of Christ's nature or story by himself but together the two accomplish the great salvation of Middle Earth. Like Christ's salvation of humankind from sin and death, Gandalf and Frodo help redeem the fallen kingdoms of Middle Earth and destroy the One Ring and Sauron.

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