The Lord of the Rings as a Christian Allegory

To what extent can *The Lord of the Rings* epic by J.R.R. Tolkien be considered a Christian allegory?

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Abstract:

The purpose of this extended essay is to challenge J.R.R. Tolkien’s classification of his epic *The Lord of the Rings* as a myth by examining the question “To what extent can *The Lord of the Rings* be considered a Christian allegory?” This investigation was conducted by comparing the epic to the First Part of the classic Christian allegory *The Pilgrim’s Progress* by John Bunyan where Christian travels to the Celestial City. The features of Christian allegories that are examined in this paper are: symbolism, the journey motif, and religious themes.

*The Lord of the Rings* has symbolism in its characters, settings, and objects just as *The Pilgrim’s Progress* does. While Tolkien’s characters are rounder and more realistic, they, like Bunyan’s, symbolize religious figures. As well, the settings and objects in both novels are often Biblical allusions. The journey motif that is common in Christian allegories is also present in both novels. *The Lord of the Rings* contains the essential elements of the motif such as an archetypal protagonist, the struggles of obedience to God’s will and the dependency of man on God. In addition, Tolkien’s epic contains religious themes shared with Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. These themes include the concept of redemption and the strength of community when following God.

The commonality between Tolkiens’ and Bunyan’s works despite author’s Tolkien’s intent suggests further areas of exploration. Do other interpretations of *The Lord of the Rings* have significant merit despite Tolkien’s rejections? Is it the author’s intent or the reader’s experience of a literary work which determines the true classification and messages of the novel?
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Introduction:

J.R.R. Tolkien’s most famous work, *The Lord of the Rings* epic, has been widely enjoyed since its publication in the 1950’s. Yet with admiration has also come evaluation by readers and critics alike leading to a plethora of interpretations. Most of these find the work symbolic of a variety of political, moral, or social issues of Tolkien’s time, for example the horrors of World War II which took place during the novel’s creation. However, the author himself declared that the story is “not ‘about’ anything but itself” (qtd. Fuller 124) and instead of an allegory regards his epic to be a myth similar to its prequel *The Hobbit*. Nonetheless, there is a clear difference between the children’s light-hearted adventure quest and its thematically darker sequel despite their shared setting and characters. In addition, there is evidence, including even the author’s own admission, which suggests that *The Lord of the Rings* is a highly Christian novel due perhaps not to purposeful intention but to Tolkien’s strong religious convictions as a devout Catholic (Wood; Fuller 141). This essay will question whether *The Lord of the Rings* can be considered a Christian allegory.

Allegories are narratives that describe the world and have the didactical purpose of instructing readers on a particular philosophy or code of behavior. The fictional characters, settings, and plot have a secondary level of understanding which goes beyond their literal meaning (Caldwell). To understand the author’s message it is at this symbolic level that the text must be examined. Christian allegories have the same features, but their message is moral and their themes follow Christian teachings. Common literary features of Christian allegories include symbolism, often in the form of Biblical allusions and the journey motif which symbolizes the pursuit of a life of faith in God. *The Pilgrim’s Progress* by John Bunyan is one of the earliest Christian allegories and a classic example having all of the described elements. This essay will
use the first part of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* in comparison to examine whether *The Lord of the Rings* has the features of a Christian allegory.

Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* has influenced literature resulting in most subsequent fantasy novels to have elements of his work (Curles). However, the true significance of this narrative is found in the message of the epic. Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings* not with the purpose to instruct, but to express his understanding of the truths of the world through story (Curles). However, an allegorical and didactic message can be interpreted about Tolkien’s faith. This adds to the debate of whether it is an author’s intent or the reader’s interpretation that holds the greater importance. *The Lord of the Rings* can be considered a Christian allegory as it contains the necessary literary features such as symbolism, the journey motif and religious themes.

**Symbolism:**

Symbolism is one of the defining aspects of Christian allegories. Usually every aspect of characterization, setting, and plot development has a secondary level of interpretation. It is at this level where the author conveys the message. The primary level’s only purpose is to be a vehicle for this. Therefore what happens on the literal level is dictated by the metaphoric level. For brevity, this essay will only explore a few examples of the main types of symbolism: characters, setting and objects from *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

In *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, the characters are classic examples of Christian allegorical characters. They are flat, one-dimensional, and primarily static as each character is the personification of a Christian concept. This is depicted by the characters’ names. One example of this is the character Faithful. When arrested at Vanity Fair, Faithful speaks against their earthly way of living and is consequently “burnt to ashes” (Bunyan 109). Faithful’s martyrdom is a
demonstration of his faithfulness towards God. Like his name indicates, he refuses to change showing unbending commitment despite pressure according to Bunyan’s Evangelistic beliefs. The actions of Faithful and of other characters who personify ideas help convey Bunyan’s didactical message of faith.

The characters of The Lord of the Rings have similarly high levels of symbolism to those of The Pilgrim’s Progress. However, while the characters of Bunyan’s novel usually personify religious concepts, Tolkien’s characters are more often allusions to Biblical characters. For example Gandalf is a Christ-like character as he is depicted in the same way that Catholics view Jesus: a loving, self-sacrificing leader and guide. Gandalf, while leading the Company, sacrifices himself so the others may continue, falls into a chasm “beyond light and knowledge” and fights a Balrog (Towers 109). Love motivates both to help those they look after even though it harms themselves. The chasm is described as a subterranean unworldly place of despair just as hell is illustrated. Gandalf’s next stage is a place where “a day was as long as a life-age of the earth” (Towers 110) which is comparable to heaven as it is positively portrayed but beyond human comprehension. Finally, at his return, Gandalf is not recognized by his followers just as is written that Jesus was (New International Version, Luke 24:36-43). Although the order of the last two stages is inversed, there is a strong connection. The similarities to Jesus in Gandalf express Tolkien’s faith and are used for instructive purposes. Much of what Gandalf does and says corresponds to the teachings of Jesus. This allows Tolkien to incorporate the principal beliefs of his faith into the novels and instruct the readers despite the lack of religion in Middle-earth.

The symbolism of Tolkien’s characters differs from that of the classic allegorical character. Characters of most allegories are flat and one dimensional limited to personifying one idea or person. This prevents the characters from distracting from the message of the story while
simultaneously makes the characters unrealistic. Tolkien’s characters, however, are not this way; they are much rounder, more believable characters. Even though they are frequently fantasy characters who are part of fictional races like hobbits and elves, they seem much more human than the humans of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Tolkien gives his characters details that while adding to the plot also create a complete picture of a real individual. For example, Pippin is portrayed as cheerful but careless due to his youth, having not yet reached his “coming of age” (*Fellowship* 22). This furthers the plot because it causes Pippin to steal the *palantir* from Gandalf to satisfy his curiosity despite being warned not to and consequently accidentally deceives Sauron gaining more time for Frodo to journey unnoticed. This is much more indirectly connected to the plot than anything found in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. In addition, much more information can be found, especially when reading the indexes, such as the names and life spans of Pippin’s eleven great-uncles and –aunts.

The settings of classic allegories are just as symbolic as the characters. In *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, the settings are often allusions to Biblical ideas or stories. One such allusion is the “Valley of the Shadow of Death” (Bunyan 68), a place which when found in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is described using this exact phrase in the Bible (*New International Version*, Psalms 23: 4). In fact, when first using the phrase, Faithful is quoting the Bible verse directly. These references are used to teach some of the ideas of the Bible. There also are cases which go beyond repetition to summarize Biblical stories. One such example is the story of how God turned Lot’s wife into a pillar of salt. This is recounted after Christian and Hopeful reach a “Monument” that seems to be “a *Woman* transformed into [the] shape of a Pillar” (Bunyan 122). These allusions are direct and instructional. They are Bunyan’s way of reiterating the stories and messages of the Bible.
The settings of *The Lord of the Rings* are also Biblical allusions but subtler. Instead of directly quoting like Bunyan, Tolkien uses names and descriptions full of visual imagery to suggest Biblical locations. For example, Mordor is also similar to the Valley of the Shadow of Death or hell. It is described as being “[t]he land of shadow” (*Return* 204). The land is black and barren and in constant darkness, bringing hopelessness to all there. Importantly, Mordor is not contained to a physical location. The Ring and the Nazgûl bring the effects of their home county to those around them. When Frodo puts on the Ring before the Witch-King of Angmar stabs him, the world from Frodo’s perspective becomes “dark and dim” (*Fellowship* 221). After being stabbed Frodo begins to transform into a Ring-wraith and falls deeper and deeper into “the wraith-world” (*Fellowship* 249). These descriptions allude to hell like Bunyan does but also go further to illustrate the corruption and despair that characterizes hell through negative diction of darkness. Allowing Mordor to stretch beyond its physical location develops the idea of hell so that it is not only a place but a lifestyle. Hell is not limited to a place but can become part of a person’s character, like it is for the Nazgûl. Tolkien does this in an allegorical manner to warn against sinfulness.

In addition to the characters and settings, there are also symbolic objects in Christian allegories. In *The Pilgrim’s Progress* the objects are symbolic of Christian concepts. One such is the “great Burden” that Christian struggles with at the beginning to the novel (*Bunyan* 1). Little is given to describe it other than that it is on his back and gives him great difficulty until “the sight of the Cross” relieves him (*Bunyan* 36). The Burden here symbolizes Christian’s sins from past wrong doings. Until he sees the Cross, the Christian symbol of Christ’s sacrifice of death for the atonement of all people’s sins, his soul is unclean. These symbols demonstrate the religious beliefs of Bunyan corresponding to the allegorical nature of the text.
In *The Lord of the Rings* there are also objects which are symbolic accordant to the traditional Christian allegorical manner. The Ring of Power which the entire story is centered around is a perfect example of this. It symbolizes the temptation of living an earthly, materialistic life. The Ring gives its bearers power but the power is linked to the evil nature of the Ring, subsequently it can never be used for good. When Frodo tries to give the Ring to Gandalf, he explains this by saying “Do not tempt me! For I do not wish to become like the Dark Lord himself. Yet the way of the Ring to my heart is ... the desire to do good” (*Fellowship* 67). This relates Tolkien’s Catholic belief that even the most altruistic reason for living an earthly life results the destruction of the person’s soul. The image of the Ring is one instance of the symbolic object being used for a didactical purpose.

**Journey Motif:**

A common occurrence among allegories is the journey motif. This literary device is used to reflect a change in the protagonist, usually from negative to positive example of how the author’s world view. In Christian allegories, the journey motif most often is used to show the transformation of a person who is living an earth-centered life to a divine one. The protagonist is an archetype for the average Christian in these situations and the novel recounts his successes and failures. Usually in Christian allegories the protagonist almost fails due to the weakness of his humanity but in the end through the kindness of God, he is saved, achieving everlasting life.

In *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christian is the archetype of an average Christian following the typical role of the protagonist in Christian allegories with the journey motif. He is the most identifiable character of the novel not having any extraordinary abilities or characteristics. His most definable and important feature is the spark within him that causes him to try with incredible persistence to reach God. This is not to imply that he never fails but that when he does
he recovers and continues on. For example, for the most part Christian goes along the “Right Path” that is “strait and narrow” (Bunyan 24) yet at one point he leaves the path for another that is “the easiest going” (Bunyan 126). Not long after, he realizes that he has gone astray from the way and repents just as he also did after he “fell into fast Sleep” and lost his “Roll [that] was the Assurance of his Life” (Bunyan 44). Christian sometimes goes against his instructions, but after each time he recovers and amends his ways. This is describing the common Christian on his journey for eternal life: imperfect but constantly aiming for perfection. Bunyan’s character is one that the readers can identify with and find hope in. Christian brings hope and renewed strength for the readers to continue to strive on their own journeys of faith: a purpose of Christian allegories.

In The Lord of the Rings, Frodo is a similar archetype of a common Christian. As the protagonist and the most average, especially in the company of so many extraordinary characters like Gandalf and Aragorn, he is the most identifiable for the readers. Like Christian, it is only his courage and dedication that makes Frodo special. Frodo likewise has moments of weakness that he recovers from. For example, at the Prancing Pony, he sings, drinks and forgetting his task, slips the Ring on creating a scene when he “vanishes as if he had gone slap through the floor without leaving a hole” (Fellowship 182). Afterwards he is much more subtle and avoids public spectacles. In another circumstance, Frodo put on the Ring after Boromir tries to take it and draws the attention of “the Eye” that tries to control him. A “Voice” battles against the power of the Eye, giving Frodo the power to choose. He removes the Ring and has renewed inspiration to complete his journey (Fellowship 451). Frodo’s actions demonstrate the difficulty of unwavering obedience to God. Yet despite his blunders, Frodo reaffirms his dedication and continues on.
Tolkien includes this to inspire the readers who can identify with Frodo but sometimes lose courage after falling short. This inspiration is one of the purposes of Christian allegories.

Unlike in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* where Christian is the sole archetype for the common Christian, in *The Lord of the Rings* this archetype role is more complex, being portrayed as multiple characters. Frodo is the archetype as well the protagonist. Nevertheless, towards the end of the story, Tolkien employs additional characters to fully emphasize the difficulty of the journey of faith. As Frodo nears Mt. Doom he becomes increasingly quiet and weak, barely having the strength to continue. It is at this point that the characters Sam and Gollum who have been his constant companions along his journey, personify the two sides of Frodo’s internal struggle. Sam is the ideal child of God demonstrating the character traits of a Christian striving for a spiritual life: love and faithfulness. Due to his love, Sam worries constantly over Frodo forgetting his own personal safety and needs to provide for Frodo. At the foot of Mt. Doom, when Frodo has run out of strength, Sam declares that he will “carry Mr. Frodo up [him]self, if it breaks [his] back and [his] heart” and “[h]is will was set, only death would break it. He no longer felt either desire or need to sleep” (*Return* 232). Conversely, Gollum personifies the decrepit product of a person fallen to sin. He is characterized to be animalistic, described as being “a wretched creature” and is portrayed through similes like spiders, and frequent usage of verbs like “hissing” and “snuffling” (*Towers* 244). Sam and Gollum hate each other and compete for Frodo’s attention and love. Sam criticizes Gollum and tries to convince Frodo that they cannot trust him, while Gollum tries to divide the friends, looking for Frodo’s approval while wishing Sam gone. This rivalry is the personification of Frodo’s internal struggle between good and evil. This demonstration is much more complex than anything portrayed in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, yet it is not altogether uncommon in allegories. In fact, the competition is similar to the
common literary device that is used frequently in allegories: the image of the angel and devil on each shoulder of a person, arguing each side of a moral decision. The origin of this can be traced back to *The Sheppard of Hermas*, an early Christian apocryphal, allegorical text that recounts Hermas’s visions, commandments and parables (Chapman).

Another characteristic of the journey motif found in Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is the near failure of the protagonist. In Christian allegories it is common for the protagonist to not be able to finish due to his human weaknesses. However, divine help intervenes and he is able to complete his journey. In *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, this occurs when Christian is crossing “the River” to at last reach the Celestial City and he “los[ses] his senses” to his past sins and almost drowns (Bunyan 182). But Hopeful reminds him of the scriptures and Christian “sees [Christ] again” and they cross the River (Bunyan 183). Bunyan has Christian almost defeated by his sins but saved by Jesus to demonstrate his belief that humans are weak by themselves and require the help of God to succeed.

Frodo at the top of Mt. Doom goes through a similar experience. After completing his journey Frodo loses the willpower to destroy the Ring, in speaking of this he says: “I will not do this deed” (*Return* 239). The Ring is only destroyed seemingly by chance via Gollum. The characters suggest that it is more than luck as Frodo reminds Sam that Gandalf hinted that “Gollum may have something yet to do” (*Return* 241). In this climactic scene, Tolkien most directly implies the existence of a benevolent supernatural force that watches over and assists the characters to achieve their goals. This force is not referred to as God as there is no religion in Middle-earth, however this cosmic power is supportive of the characters’ attempts to be good. Critics agree that the world of Middle-earth seems to have been arranged “by great hands” allowing problems to end well despite the seeming impossibility of it (Kocher 12). This supports
a didactic interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings* as an allegory which teaches of the nature of the universe and the existence of a God who helps his children to succeed when they would otherwise fail.

**Religious Themes:**

The aim of allegories is to be instructive and thus the purpose of Christian allegories is to teach the principles of the author’s denomination. Some beliefs take form in the characters and plot, but there are always some present in the themes. As Christian allegories, the themes correspond to the teachings of the Bible. Although there are many, this essay will only touch upon a few of the shared Christian themes of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Both declare the possibility of redemption and the necessity of fellowship.

In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian’s entire journey is a search for redemption. In the beginning of the novel he is distressed and weeps because he is “condemned to die” and “not fit to go to Judgment” (Bunyan 3). The Evangelist sends him on his journey for redemption and “Eternal Life” (Bunyan 4), yet not long after Christian leaves the path. However, the Evangelist sets him right and quotes the Bible “All manner of Sin and Blasphemies shall be forgiven unto men” (*New International Version*, Matt. 12:31) This idea is repeated throughout the novel as he encourages everyone Christian encounters to join him and praise to God for his kindness of saving sinners. Christian and his companions spend their time speaking of and doing what they see as an impossible attempt to redeem themselves. Their conversations, following the allegorical manner, are didactic, giving clear steps to following God and warnings of how people lose their way.

Redemption is also a theme in *The Lord of the Rings*. There is the message that people cannot be classified as good or evil since there is always the possibility of change. This means
that characters who seem corrupt can amend their ways if they choose. The clearest example of this is the character Sméagol/Gollum. Originally hobbit-like, Sméagol became corrupted by exposure to the Ring which transformed him into the weak, hateful creature Gollum. Yet when shown pity, a well encouraged Christian feeling towards the downtrodden and sinful, Gollum resumes some of his former state. He becomes happy and in less pain, but one of the most significant marks of this transition is the change in diction of his speech from using the plural “we” (meaning Gollum and the Ring) to singular “I” (meaning Sméagol) (Kocher 61). This opportunity for change is presented in other parts of the epic, although it is not always taken. For example, Solomon does not repent when Gandalf offers him forgiveness after Solomon’s defeat at Isengard (Towers 207) or when Frodo spares his life after his assassination attempt (King 325). On the other hand, when Aragorn gives the Undead Oathbreakers the opportunity, they fight against the Sauron’s armies to fulfill their oath and gain forgiveness (King 53). Tolkien includes these occurrences to teach about the kindness of God, how He will always give opportunities for people to amend themselves. Tolkien makes it clear that salvation is dependent on the choice of man to encourage his readers to make good decisions.

Another theme of The Pilgrim’s Progress is the importance of community. Bunyan emphasizes that worship of God is a communal event. Even though Christian’s family does not join him on his pilgrimage, Christian expresses regret for their absence and prays that they will find salvation (Bunyan 52). Without his family Christian still finds many companions along his travels. Hopeful and Faithful are with him the longest but he meets many others and encourages them to join him. Bunyan demonstrates the need for community by illustrating the benefits of their combined strength. When together they help each other overcome the difficulties of their journey. Without Christian, Hopeful would have fallen asleep at the Enchanted Ground and
without Hopeful (Bunyan 156), Christian would have lost hope and died when trapped in the Doubting Castle (Bunyan 130-1). Through the theme of companionship Bunyan expresses a desire for Christians to come together to worship God, as it helps to them succeed in following the proper path.

Tolkien uses the same theme of the value of community. When Frodo comes to understand that he must take the Ring to Rivendell, he believes that he must go alone, however, Gandalf tells him that he can take a companion and instructs Sam to go with him (Fellowship 69-70). From then on Frodo is never alone, he is joined by Sam and others who become the Fellowship which resembles the Church, with Gandalf as Jesus and the others as the congregation who share in collective joy and pain (Wood). Even though Frodo tries to leave the Company, he is never alone as Sam is always with him. Frodo would never be able to reach Mt. Doom without Sam’s strength and devotion. Tolkien, like Bunyan, has woven the essentiality of companionship into the plot of his story teaching his readers of the benefits of community when following God.

**Conclusion:**

*The Lord of the Rings* can be seen as a Christian allegory as it has many of the literary features which are commonly found in classic Christian allegories such as high levels of symbolism, the journey motif, and religious themes. Tolkien’s epic, like Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, has symbolic settings and objects which allude to Biblical locations and concepts. Both sets of characters also have a secondary level of meaning which relates to the authors’ religions, although it should be noted that the characters of Middle-earth are much rounder and more realistic characters than those of Bunyan’s fantasy world. In addition to symbolism, Tolkien’s narrative also has the journey motif common of Christian allegories which represents
the journey of faith that the archetypal devoted take to follow God. This pilgrimage is one that contains hardships and cannot be successful without the grace of God. Finally, *The Lord of the Rings* has religious themes that correspond to the Tolkien’s faith and can even be found in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Despite Tolkien’s declarations that his epic is not an allegory, it has enough of the features found in classic Christian allegories to be considered allegorical if not a classic example of the genre.

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