

KINGSHIP, PRIESTHOOD AND PROPHECY IN *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

As a wealth of critical interest has begun to accumulate around it, J.R.R. Tolkien's epic trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings* has been subjected to considerable ill-judged comment. Generally, friend and foe alike have praised and damned these books for relatively trivial reasons, and most of this misplaced comment seems to stem from a failure to appreciate the nature of the underlying schema which gives the work its depth and power. The fact that there is nothing really esoteric about this schema, that its leading ideas have been a traditional part of much Western thinking these many centuries, provides something of a sad commentary on the narrowness of our contemporary intellectual horizons.

Tolkien's underlying schema is outside the range of vision afforded by the framework of currently familiar humanist beliefs. Again, it is not primarily an array of conflicting ethical precepts, which array provides the stuff of many a so-called Christian novel in the Green-Waugh mould. Rather, it is based on certain traditional theological concepts of Christian soteriology, i.e., the study of the purpose and manner of Christ's redemption of the world. As these concepts do not seem to be too widely appreciated, it would seem to be a useful exercise to briefly outline the schema and indicate the main ways in which it is worked out in terms of Tolkien's chief characters.

Much of the claim to enduring attention which is possessed by *The Lord of the Rings* rests on its treatment of human response to the challenge of spiritually-derived offices, and of personal growth in stature and dignity through conflict. Further, to grasp this particular treatment it is necessary to understand that, according to the Christian dynamic of redemption, there are three chief aspects to the manner in which Christ acts to save the world. He is seen as acting through the exercise of a loving mastery that brings about a renewal of just order and harmony; through a self-sacrifice that effects an atonement and unleashes a flood of grace; and through his teachings which embody the truths necessary for salvation. And this is the pattern of all Christian mediation, since, incorporated into Christ's life through Baptism, the life of a Christian is also a life of redemptive activity, a striving for the establishment of the reign of Love and the triumph of Charity. Through the exercise of the Christian offices of kingship, priesthood, and prophecy, each person, sharing in the person of Christ, may act as a co-saviour of the world.

This is the schema which appears to underlie much of the action and the development of character in *The Lord of the Rings*. Middle-earth is saved through the priestly self-sacrifice of the hobbit, Frodo; through the wisdom and guidance of Gandalf the wizard; and through the mastery of Aragorn, the heir of kings. There are beings and forces at work above and beyond these three, but these latter are key, personal channels through which the higher powers operate, given the free assent of the chosen agents. Further, as each of these agents progressively responds to the demands of the primary office to which he has been called, so he grows in power and grace, and begins to exercise the other two redemptive offices in greater depth. In Christian terms, each of the three central figures becomes increasingly Christ-like. Thus in this epic the author not only provides insights (in terms of the Christian vision) into the process whereby the world is saved in any day or age, but also explores some essential aspects of that development of human personality that is usually called, “the growth in sanctity.”

I

To Frodo Baggins, the rustic hobbit, is given the central task and “the darkest road” in the salvation of Middle-earth. His mission is the destruction of the evil Ring of Power. This Ring does not merely confer power. Rather, it is Power existing in itself and for itself. Within it is contained the greater part of the Enemy's evil potential to corrupt and enslave even the strongest among those who work for the establishment of the Good.

In the course of this quest Frodo moves from the most care-free and comfortable of existences through a series of heroic toils and sacrifices to an eventual self-emptying in the dogged pursuit of a seemingly impossible end. Always, in this trial, Frodo remains the Lamb whose only real strength is his capacity to make an offering of himself. Thus, from the very beginning, Tolkien is at pains to stress that it is in an interior priesthood of sacrifice that Frodo's hope lies. The unseen powers that have selected him, in the apparently most accidental of ways, for the chief task, have chosen Frodo neither for power nor wisdom (Vol. I, 70). Elrond, the great lore-master, declares that neither strength nor wisdom will prevail in the destruction of the Ring, and the hobbit accepts the burden, crying in anguish: “I will take the Ring, though I do not know the way.” (Vol. 1, 284).

Throughout his long journey it is made quite clear that it is essentially a spirit of dedication, despite lack of knowledge, that holds Frodo to his appointed path: “I am commanded

to go to the Land of Mordor, and therefore I shall go. If there is only one way then I must take it. What comes after, must come.” (Vol. II, 246). Towards the end of the quest, Frodo is left with only the capacity to will, as he becomes physical incapable of performing his task. Then, when the moment comes for the actual destruction of the Ring, the theme of self-negation in sacrifice reaches its highest point: the ability to will is taken from him. Overcome at last by the evil power of the Ring (which power is increased greatly within Mordor), he is incapable of choosing to destroy it, and the Ring speaks through him: “I have come. But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!” (Vol. III, 223).

Frodo's sacrifice, though complete is, in itself, not enough. Here, Tolkien's treatment of the idea of priesthood takes on a new dimension. It is only when Frodo's self-abnegation is linked to those of a number of others that the quest is completed. Without the sacrifices of Sam, his faithful servant, Frodo would have been physically incapable of reaching his goal, the Mountain of Fire. Further, without the self-denials of many others in refusing at various times, against the dictates of inclination and natural reason, to slay the murderous Gollum, the Ring would never have fallen into the volcanic depths and so be unmade. It is communal priesthood which, in the end, is decisive.

Although it is Frodo's main role, he is not merely a priest-victim. As his quest progresses he also grows in stature as king and prophet. Even before he sets out on his journey, we gather that he is a person of some (rather vague) authority in his immediate environs, he is regarded by Gandalf and Bilbo as the best hobbit in the Shire, and he is given to a degree of scholarship (a rare thing among hobbits). However, these are mere shadowy anticipations of what, in fact, he is to become.

The kingship he attains is strongly defined, yet it never concerns more than two persons - his servant, Sam, and his bitter enemy Gollum. Both of these, although for quite different reasons, freely enter under his dominion and acknowledge him as “Master.” This limited but intense authority does not become apparent until all three are alone together as a little community cut off from all but hostile forces in the wastelands near Mordor, the Enemy's strong-hold. The transformation in Frodo's status is heavily underscored by Tolkien in that right to the very conclusion of the first volume, where Frodo and Sam are members of a larger party, Frodo remains “Mr Baggins” to his servant. Immediately they are alone, in fact in the very first words

of the second section of volume two, Frodo is “Master.” Stripped of all other personal authority and personal friendship, Frodo becomes virtually responsible for the welfare of his dearest friend, and later for that of his most dangerous foe. It is in this context that Frodo is revealed to his subjects as, “... a tall stern shadow, a mighty lord who hid his brightness in grey cloud, ...” (Vol. 11, 225). Such is his authority that, before Faramir of Gondor, Frodo is capable of formally taking under his protection his deadly adversary, taking upon himself the pent-up malice of the fallen Gollum. (Vol. 11, 300).

Finally, as the quest continues, Frodo grows in wisdom and foresight, so that when all is over even Saruman, the evil wizard, must grudgingly allow: “You have grown, Halfling. Yes, you have grown very much. You are wise, and cruel.” (Vol. III, 299). Quite early in his progress he begins to be subject to visions, and perceives the hidden ring of Galadriel the Elf-queen. Later he warns Gollum of the danger he is bringing upon himself (Vol. II, 248), and eventually predicts his destruction: "Begone, and trouble me no more! If you touch me ever again, you shall be cast yourself into the Fire of Doom." (Vol. III, 221).

At the end of the story, in the period between the destruction of the Ring and the passing of the ring-bearers into the West, Frodo does not revert to the simple, country hobbit that we first knew. The offices of his quest remain with him in a permanent transformation of character. His kingship is now veiled and thus he takes no active, war-like role in the scouring of the Shire. In this situation he acts as counsellor and peacemaker. His priesthood is still very much in evidence however in frequent bouts of illness and depression. He is “... wounded with knife, sting, and tooth, and a long burden.” (Vol. III, 268). Healing and rest come only in his eventual departure into the West beyond the confines of Middle-earth.

II

As Frodo moves to the exercise of kingship and prophecy through his acceptance of the priesthood that is thrust upon him, so with Aragorn, the heir of kings, the development to fulness of kingly authority involves him in long years of sacrifice, danger and the growth in wisdom. If there is dramatic contrast between Frodo the simple, country creature, and Frodo the acclaimed hero of the struggle with Sauron, such contrast is equally vivid between Strider the despised and foul-seeming Ranger, and Elessar the crowned king of Gondor, Lord of the Western lands.

The king is first encountered in a country tavern where he sits grim and travel-stained, shunned by those folk whom he and his knights secretly protect. Already, he is “the greatest traveller and huntsman of this age of the world” (Vol. I, 67), yet he begs the lowly hobbits to allow him to accompany them on their journey, and confesses: “...I hoped you would take me for my own sake. A hunted man sometimes wearies of distrust and longs for friendship.” (Vol. I, 183). This theme of self-sacrifice is continued when we later learn that he has served, under a disguise, in the armies of Gondor and Rohan, rejecting the honours bestowed on him in those kingdoms. He has gone “out into the wild” for some thirty years in a thankless guard over the weak, and, labouring to repair the fault of Isildur his forefather, he has walked “in sight on the Black Gate” of Mordor, and trod “the deadly flowers of Morgul Vale.” (Vol. I, 264, 266). Even in the house of his protector Elrond, where his kingship is known and honoured, he shuns his rightful place at the feast and continues to wear his begrimed clothes, sitting quietly alone in a corner at the Council of Elrond. Amidst all these trials no sacrifice is keener or more secret than his acceptance of the long deferment of his marriage to his betrothed, Arwen Undomiel who “... shall not be the bride of any Man less than the King of both Gondor and Arnor.” (Vol. III, 342). Thus, before the action of the trilogy begins as within that action, the life of Aragorn the king has been one of dedicated but hidden priesthood, a priesthood intensified by the demands of his lineage and future status.

As Aragorn's days of trial approach an end, the nature of his task becomes more overt and he begins to put forth all his kingly powers. Within the action itself, the first manifestation of his extraordinary authority comes by way of his powers of healing when, using a simple herb, he is able to relieve the wound that Frodo has received from a bewitched Mordor knife. Later, as the pace of events quickens, the authority of his will becomes increasingly apparent. He takes possession of the seeing-stone of Numenor and through its agency wrestles with the will of the Dark Lord himself. Again, he summons the dead to fight under his banner, and through strength of will holds the living to his command despite their terror at their ghostly comrades in arms.

But even with his mighty deeds and victory in battle, it is not as a conquering warrior that he first returns to his people of Gondor. Rather, he comes secretly in the guise of a healer, turning from the battlefield to tend the wounded and dying; and it is this facet that Tolkien endeavours to continually stress in his treatment of the office of kingship - the king as renewer, authority as healing, and power as a tool designed to set free those subject to it. This is most

clearly seen in Aragorn, but it is also present in Frodo's dominion over Gollum. The latter's one hope of freedom from the evil that possesses him lies in obedience to the master he has set over himself (Vol. II, 240-241).

Great depths of wisdom and foresight are Aragorn's as the fruit of his sacrificial labours and his inheritance of kingship. Instructed in the house of Elrond, wisest of lore-masters, and schooled by wanderings in many lands, he knows the origin, the history, and the tongues of Middle-earth: "Thus he became at last the most hardy of living Men, skilled in their crafts and lore, and was yet more than they, for he was elven-wise, and there was a light in his eyes that when they were kindled few could endure." (Vol. III, 341). His foresight is a gift of birth. All those of his household possess unusual gifts of sight, hearing, and understanding (Vol. I, 161), and these prophetic gifts are constantly in evidence throughout the epic. He foresees Gandalf's fall in the mines of Moria, he predicts the doom of the Orcs at the height of their triumph in the battle of Helm's Deep, and we learn that even as a youth he dared prophesy to his great guardian Elrond.

The bestowal of such powers on his king by the author is not just a piece of fanciful embroidery. It is essential if the meaning of kingship is to be fully explored, and the process of salvation through kingship is to be adequately represented. Such power and authority does Aragorn possess, that lacking the guidance of a far-seeing wisdom, he could be a force for immense harm. But Aragorn knows his own place and his authority is tempered. He acknowledges himself as less than Gandalf the wizard (Vol. II, 38); he bows his knee to Frodo as Ringbearer and chief in the downfall of the Enemy; and in the end, feeling the approach of old age and seeing his son ripe for kingship, he knows it is time to willingly embrace death (Vol. III, 343).

III

Gandalf the wizard is the major prophet figure of the trilogy. His role is essentially that of chief counsellor and guide of those who work for the overthrow of Sauron. Of mysterious origin, he is a member of an order of five wizards who appear "in the shape of men" during the third age of Middle-earth, coming out of the Far West as messengers sent to contest the power of Sauron (Vol. III, 365). Their positive aim is the establishment of "Knowledge, Rule, Order" (Vol. I, 272), but they are forbidden to use force or fear in so doing.

Gandalf is first encountered in the children's book, *The Hobbit*, which precedes the major epic in the chronology of Middle-earth. Here, he is a grey old man who acts as guide and advisor to Bilbo and the Dwarfs in their search for treasure, and who unites the divided foes of Sauron in the Battle of the five Armies. Despite his age, he occasionally reveals amazing powers of magic, and strength of body. Among other things, with a single sword-thrust, he kills the Great Goblin of the halls under the mountains (*The Hobbit*, 76). These themes of veiled strength, overt wisdom, and dedication to the service of others, are continued and developed in the later books, although during the course of the trilogy, Gandalf undergoes a dramatic transformation. Nothing that he has been before is denied, but at one point all his powers are greatly enhanced by a re-consecration “through fire and deep water.” This occurs during his contest with the Balrog of Morogoth. He is victorious, but his staff of authority is broken and he dies, straying “out of thought and time” until he is “sent back” to complete the overthrow of Sauron. (Vol. II, 105-106). Transformed by death and resurrection he is now “... more dangerous than anything you will ever meet, unless you are brought alive before the seat of the Dark Lord.” (Vol. II, 103). As Gimli the Dwarf perceives, “Gandalf’s head is now sacred,” and no ordinary weapon can wound him as he had been wounded some years before in the Battle of the Five Armies. (*The Hobbit*, 298).

His re-consecration does not seem to greatly affect Gandalf in his prophetic office. There appears to be some enhancement of his powers of perception as when he stands on the walls of Minas Tirith after the battle and beholds instantly, “... with the sight that was given to him all that had befallen ...” (Vol. III, 132). However he is still very much the guide and counsellor of old. Where the great change does occur is in his exercise of priesthood and kingship. The latter is now less closely veiled, and with the former, there is added to his earlier interior priesthood of self-sacrifice some elements that are suggestive of the public, sacerdotal office conventionally associated with the priest in most societies.

Before his return from death, Gandalf's priesthood is one of long, secret labours known only to a few. On his arrival in Middle-earth he is greeted by Cirdan, the Elven shipwright, who bestows upon him one of the three elf-rings, saying: “Take this ring, Master, for your labours will be heavy; but it will support you in the weariness that you have taken upon yourself.” (Vol. III, 366). This weariness is continually evident in his “bent and troubled” appearance and is induced not only by mental anguish and the physical danger in many of his journeys, but by smaller

details such as his unpopularity in the very Shire for which he cares so deeply. Also, during this period, Gandalf's kingship is heavily disguised. Bilbo catches a glimpse of the wizard's authority when the old hobbit has doubts about releasing the Ring from his charge; and at the council of Elrond, Gandalf's mein is that of " ... some wise king of ancient legend." Again, when with a little band he is besieged by wolf packs, he rises up as " ... a great menacing shape like the monument of some ancient king of stone set upon a hill." (Vol. I, 312).

These earlier glimpses are mere tokens of the heights to which Gandalf rises as his contest with Sauron begins to reach its climax. Standing revealed before Aragorn and his two companions in the forest of Fangorn, "His hair was white as snow in the sunshine: and gleaming white was his robe; the eyes under his deep brows were bright, piercing as the rays of the sun; power was in his hand." (Vol. II, 98). Later, in debate with Denethor the ruling steward of Gondor, Gandalf himself indicates the extent of his authority over the creatures of Middle-earth: "But I will say this: the rule of no realm is mine neither of Gondor nor any other, great or small. But all worthy things that are in peril as the world now stands, those are my care. And for my part, I shall not wholly fail of my task, though Gondor should perish, if anything passes through this night that can still grow fair or bear fruit and flower again in days to come. For I also am a steward. Did you not know?" (Vol. III, 30-31).

Repeatedly in this final phase, when a situation demands such action, Gandalf augments his role as counsellor with that of priest-king. Thus, he swiftly heals, in mind and body, Theoden, King of Rohan, in a manner which cannot be explained in terms of the effect of wise counsel or the promptings of personal affection of the King for Gandalf. He also revives with touch of the hand, Gimli the dwarf, who has been overcome by Gandalf's unveiled magnificence. Again, after unsuccessfully reasoning with the fallen Saruman, he masters the evil wizard with his voice, breaks Saruman's staff of office, and formally casts him from the order of wizards. Then on the battlefield, as "the White Rider," revealed in his wrath, Gandalf's mere presence is capable of filling his friends with courage and his enemies with terror. Finally, in a ceremonial acceptance of his sacred offices, it is Gandalf who crowns Aragorn as the King kneels before him.

IV

This paper has examined what seems to be the most important respect in which Tolkien's epic draws on a Christian world-vision. True, there are other aspects of the work which also

evidence a fundamentally Christian orientation. The ethical code of the opponents of Sauron is one instance of this.

Again, Tolkien's cosmology and salvation history have certain clear affinities with Christian traditions. Within this basic orientation, elements stemming from non-Christian sources are also blended, but these latter are never permitted to disturb the essential vision. At every point, the human dynamics of *The Lord of the Rings* are drawn from the traditional pattern ascribed to Christ's redemptive activity, and once this is perceived, the way is opened to an informed critical approach to the work in question.

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