SIN AND REDEMPTION
IN THE WORLD OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN’S
“LORD OF THE RINGS”

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Summary

“The Lord of the Rings” is the culmination of John Ronald Reuel Tolkien’s lifelong ambition of creating a national epic for the English. Throughout his life, he was influenced by multiple mythologies and religions. If one takes a closer look, some motives in “The Lord of the Rings” show astonishing parallels to motives in these myths. Concentrating on parallels to the Bible that can be found in Tolkien’s work, the most important aspects are the motives of Sin and Redemption.

Both in “The Lord of the Rings” and in the Bible, Sin originates from a fall from grace, either of an angel, godlike creatures, or of men. The important difference is, that in “The Lord of the Rings”, Sin is not inevitably a part of human life. Instead, Sin seems to be represented by the One Ring of the Dark Lord Sauron. Hence, Redemption is brought with the destruction of the One Ring. The hobbit Frodo bears the Ring and with it the Sin of Middle Earth like Jesus carried the cross. Unlike Christ, Frodo fails to destroy the Ring by sacrificing himself. In his stead the creature Gollum destroys the Ring by his unwilling sacrifice. The destruction of the One Ring means Redemption for Middle Earth and everything that lives on it.

Particularly for Gondor, a kingdom of men, Redemption is brought by the man Aragorn, the heir to the line of kings. The character Aragorn shows parallels to the figure of a Messiah, as it is described in the Bible, namely the Old Testament. With his reign comes a time of justice and peace for the people of Gondor.

In the Bible, Redemption is predicted for a point at the end of time. Furthermore, in the Bible, Redemption is always brought by God. In contrast, in “The Lord of the Rings”, Redemption is brought within time by the destruction of the One Ring. Also, there is almost no interference from the gods, the races of Middle Earth have to fend for themselves. Therefore it is a secularised Redemption.

Next to motives from the Nordic and Greek myths, Tolkien uses many biblical motives in his epic “The Lord of the Rings”. In summary, I could show that Tolkien employs in particular the motives of Sin and Redemption from the Bible but with distinct differences.
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**Literature**
Introduction

“The Lord of the Rings” is one of the most important fictional novels of the 20th century. For many years I have been fascinated by the novel and the world surrounding it. I have read it and its accompanying novels – such as the Silmarillion - many times, each time discovering a new intriguing aspect.

By writing “The Lord of the Rings”, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien wanted to give a national epic to the English people, which they should be able to identify with.¹ He wanted to create an epic that would mean the same to his people that for example Homer’s Ilias and Odyssey mean to the Greek or the Kalevala and the Edda mean to the Nordic people.² To achieve his goal he combined motives from all of these epics with his own ideas, so that one is now able to recognise some of them when reading “The Lord of the Rings”.

Most recognisable and probably also the best known are the aforementioned Nordic myths, such as the Kalevala, the Edda and the saga of the Nibelungs.³ For example, the idea of a ring being an object of power and desired by many, is found in the saga of the Nibelungs.

In addition to that, Tolkien used motives from Greek and Roman legends, as well as Celtic mythology. The idea of a pantheon, where each god has a different responsibility is for example employed in Greek and Nordic myths.

But as I am very interested in religious studies, especially concerning the Bible, I discovered not only parallels to the aforementioned mythologies, but also to biblical motives.

In the beginning, I wanted to write about all of the legends and myths mentioned above and their parallels in “The Lord of the Rings”, but unfortunately this would have gone beyond the scope of my work. Therefore, I decided to confine myself to write about the biblical motives I found in the novel.

As there would have still been too many to fit within the twelve pages, I finally chose to write about Sin and Redemption in the world of Tolkien’s “The Lord of the Rings”, as these are the most important and most frequently found biblical motives in the novel. In the

² See: http://www.tolkienwelt.com
³ See: http://www.amsan.org/tolkien.html
following text, I will try to answer the question, how far biblical motives of Sin and Redemption were picked up in “The Lord of the Rings”.

In order to make it easier for readers who haven’t read the novel to understand my work, I first summarise “The Lord of the Rings” and give a short overview on the world it is set in. I also include a short biography of John Ronald Reuel Tolkien and his motives and intentions for writing “The Lord of the Rings”.

In the main part of my work I describe the motives of Sin and Redemption how they appear in the Bible and in Jewish and Christian mythology. Afterwards I search for the appearance of Sin and Redemption in the novel and compare these motives to the ones in the Bible.

In the conclusion, I finally highlight the similarities as well as important differences between the motives of Sin and Redemption in the Bible and in “The Lord of the Rings”.

1. **The Life and Work of John Ronald Reuel Tolkien**

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born on the 3rd of January 1892 in Bloemfountain in South Africa and was brought up as a Roman Catholic. In 1895 his family moved to England, for which he fought in World War I.

It is often believed, that his experiences in the trench in France influenced him greatly. Although it was of course a severe experience, he himself wrote in a letter to a fellow professor, that he did not feel as if “either war (and of course not the atomic bomb) had any influence upon either the plot or the manner of [the] unfolding [of The Lord of the Rings].” According to Tolkien, if it had any influence at all, then it affected the development of some landscapes.

Tolkien married Edith Bratt in 1916, with whom he had three sons and daughters. In the same year, he participated in the battle of the Somme and returned to England to recuperate from an injury.

In 1924 Tolkien became professor of English in Leeds and from 1945 on he taught English and Literature in Oxford.

Triggered by his interest in languages, he created several new ones like Sindarin and Quenya later to be used by the elves in “The Lord of the Rings”. In contrast to the more common concept of starting a novel by inventing a story, Tolkien on the other hand started with inventing languages. He then created races to speak them and devised a world and finally a story for them to be spoken in.

What distinguishes the Elvish languages Sindarin and Quenya from most other artificial languages is, that Tolkien not only made up new vocabulary and the pronunciation thereof, he also created the corresponding grammar and scripture and even a history of their development in time. In addition, he designed individual languages for dwarves, men, hobbits and orcs, although he didn’t invent their complete grammar and development, as he did with Sindarin and Quenya.

On the 2nd of September 1973, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien died in a nursing-home at the age of 81. He was buried next to his wife in the graveyard of Wolvercote near Oxford.

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In 1954, Tolkien published the first two volumes of “The Lord of the Rings”, “The Fellowship of the Ring” and “The Two Towers”, followed by “The Return of the King”, the last volume in 1955.

“The Lord of the Rings” was the culmination of Tolkien’s work, creating a world, “Middle Earth”, for his artificial languages. Tolkien started his work already in 1916, during his recovery from a war injury, writing down short stories for his artificial creatures. Posthumously, his youngest son Christopher Tolkien collected and edited these stories and published them in 1977 in “The Silmarillion”.

In “The Lord of the Rings”, Middle Earth faces a huge war between Good and Evil. Its outcome relies on one small hobbit and the treasure he bears, the One Ring of the Dark Lord Sauron, which brings his bearer invisibility and contains dark powers. In order to regain his full strength, Sauron has to get this ring back he made and lost centuries ago. The free races of Middle Earth come to the conclusion that they can only win this war, when they destroy the One Ring. A coalition of elves, hobbits, dwarfs, wizards and men forms the fellowship of the Ring to withstand Sauron.

As the destruction is only possible in the fires of Mount Doom in the middle of Mordor, the land of Sauron, the fellowship starts a long and daunting journey. Together they can achieve, where each of them would have failed alone. Unfortunately the fellowship soon breaks after the death of one of them. The ring-bearer Frodo, a hobbit, and his friend Sam continue on their way to Mordor alone. But although the dark side is much more powerful, the rest of the fellowship - the wizard Gandalf, the elf Legolas, the dwarf Gimli and the man Aragorn, the last member of the line of kings - is able to defeat Evil several times in big and small battles all over Middle Earth. And while the last forces of the free races of Middle Earth fight the Dark Lord in the last, crucial battle, Frodo and Sam manage to destroy the Ring with the unwilling help of the creature Gollum.

With the destruction of the One Ring, the Dark Lord Sauron and his Evil powers vanish. Aragorn now becomes King of Gondor, a kingdom of men, starting the era of mankind in Middle Earth, while the elves are leaving Middle Earth for the havens of Valinor, the Undying Lands.
2. Sin and Redemption in the Bible

2.1. Sin in the Bible

The central texts on the peccability of men and the origin of Sin are found in the Book of Genesis:

- the narration of the act of Sin and how Adam and Eve are driven out of paradise (Genesis 3)
- the fratricide of Kain and Abel (Genesis 4)
- the story of the Great Flood, at the end of which a covenant between God and men is formed, regardless of their peccability (Genesis 6-9)
- the narration of the tower of Babel, which leads to the confusion of languages and the separation of men (Genesis 11)

Less known is the mention of the marriage of the sons of God and the daughters of men (Genesis 6, 1-4), which is also connected to the story of the fall of the angels from grace in the Book of Henoch, a Jewish scripture from 165 before Christ, which is not part of the Christian Bible.

In modern theology, those stories are no longer understood as incidents that really took place, but as illuminations of the experience that human life is inevitably interlaced with Sin.

The story of the act of Sin of Adam and Eve explains the broken bonds between God and men, man and woman, as well as between men and nature.

The narration of the fratricide of Kain and Abel is about men being in fault towards other men, while in the story of the Great Flood God decides to destroy man and beast, because the thoughts of man were evil. (Genesis 6, 5-7) In the story of the Tower of Babel, mankind overstrains itself wanting to be like God, building a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven (Genesis 11, 4)

The idea of being like God is also found in the myths of the fall of the angel from grace. It is told that one of God’s angels wanted to overthrow the Lord and was punished with a deep fall. The only mention of this myth in the Bible can be found hidden in the books of

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Isaiah (Isaiah 14,12) and Ezekiel (Ezekiel 28,11-18).

In the Book of Isaiah, the myth of Lucifer is transferred to the King of Babylon and in the Book of Ezekiel the story of the Cherub casted to the ground by God because of his Sin is told as a lamentation upon the King of Tyrus.

The myth of the fall of the angel from grace became quite popular in the early Christian tradition, for example in the books of the so called Fathers of the Church like Origenes and Irenaeus\textsuperscript{11} and it is a often used motive in Roman-Catholic tradition and iconography.\textsuperscript{12} Tolkien as a Roman-Catholic was certainly familiar with the story of the fallen angels and the myth of Lucifer.

The idea of the universality of Sin is adopted in the New Testament, especially by St. Paul in his letter to the Romans, whereas according to his belief the original Sin of Adam brought death into the world. (Romans 5, 12 and 6, 23: for he wages of Sin is death)\textsuperscript{13}

2.2. Redemption in the Bible

As - according to biblical texts - Sin is a constant trait of human life, the question is posed how Redemption is achieved.

First of all, it is important to acknowledge that God is always the one responsible for Redemption in the Bible.

In the Jewish tradition, under the impression of the traumatic imprisonment of the Jews in Babylon, the vision of a country and a time arose, when the godsend Messiah – the Lord’s Anointed -, a descendant of King David would bring fortune, peace and wealth (Isaiah 11 and 35) and where in the end God himself would live on the Holy mountain of Zion and rule over all nations from Jerusalem (Isaiah 2, 1-4).\textsuperscript{14} The description of the leadership of the Messiah evokes the image of Paradise, because in Isaiah 11 it is told, that wild animals

and men will live in peace together “and the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox” (Isaiah 11, 7)
Furthermore, in the time of the Messiah, the blind, the deaf, the lame and even nature will be healed. (Isaiah 35, 5-7)
According to some later biblical texts from the time of the oppression of the Jews by the Hellenistic monarch Antiochus IV Epiphanes, several battles against Evil have to be fought, before this time of Redemption will come. Such apocalyptical thoughts of a battle between Good and Evil are for example found in the Book of Daniel, which was written about 168 before Christ during the government of the aforementioned Antiochus IV.  

Christianity and the New Testament transferred the belief of a Messiah onto the man Jesus of Nazareth. In contrast to Jewish expectations, the first Christians believed that Redemption is not brought by a fighting Messiahking, but by the sacrifice of God’s son on the cross. (see for example Romans 3, 24-26; 1 Corinthians 15, 3, Galations 1, 4).
St. Paul also believed, that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ brought Redemption from death and he and the early Christians expected the arrival of this Redemption still during their lifetime. (1 Corinthians 15, 51-58)
It was a problem for the first Christians that this hope didn’t come true. So the expectations for Redemption moved to the time after death, when each individual goes to heaven, as well as to a point at the end of time with the resurrection.  

In the last book of the Christian Bible, the Revelation, there is a vision of Redemption, a vision of the holy city, the new Jerusalem, where “God is with men and will dwell with them [...]. And God shall wipe away all tears; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying.” (Revelation 21, 1-4)

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3. **Sin and Redemption in “The Lord of the Rings”**

3.1. **Sin in “The Lord of the Rings”**

If one thinks about Sin in the world of Tolkien’s “The Lord of the Rings”, the question is quickly posed, whether the One Ring represents Sin. Therefore, I will first describe the creation of the Ring and how it influences the different races of Middle Earth. Furthermore, I will try to answer important questions, such as whether Sin is inevitably a part of (human) life.

3.1.1. **The One Ring and its creator Sauron, the Dark Lord**

The One Ring was forged by the Dark Lord Sauron to control the rings of elves, men and dwarves, which hold part of the powers of these races. This can be seen in its incarvation, “One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them.” As the Ring contains a part of Sauron’s personality, they have a unique connection. Interestingly, the Ring has its own kind of consciousness and seems to be Evil by itself. Sauron is the only one who masters the Ring, while the Ring has the ability to control all others.

Sauron is probably most prominent on the minds of those knowledgeable of “The Lord of the Rings”, when thinking about Evil and Sin in the novel. Interestingly, he was not evil from the beginning. He once was the vassal of the god Aulë, the “smith and master of crafts”, which created the dwarves. In his desire for power, Sauron later left Aulë to follow Melkor, another of the gods, who became evil because he wanted to dominate the world. Melkor is often thought to represent Satan in Tolkien’s world. Sauron’s fall is similar to the fall from grace of the angel Lucifer. Like the angel, he thrived for more power. After Melkor was defeated, Sauron began to work for himself, trying to gain world domination. In Middle Earth, Sauron now takes the role of Melkor as Satan.

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3.1.2. Wizards

Wizards are a connection between the gods and men. They come from the Undying Lands, where the gods reside and are the most powerful beings in Middle Earth. They were sent to Middle Earth to assist in the war against Sauron. The question is posed, whether wizards are able to resist the temptation of the One Ring.

The best example is Saruman, once the mightiest of the five wizards on Middle Earth, who wanted the Ring for himself. In his desire for world domination, he built an army to fight against those he was sent to protect. In his desire for the One Ring and its power, Saruman sees himself as a competitor to Sauron, while in reality, by his acts he becomes evil and a follower of Sauron. His fate could once again be seen as a parallel to the fall from grace of Lucifer. Saruman wants to become the most powerful in Middle Earth, his Sin is his ambition.

The wizard Gandalf, the leader of the fellowship of the Ring, on the other hand resists the temptation of the One Ring. Although he feels the desire to possess the Ring and its power, he knows that the Ring can only be used for Evil. With the One Ring, he probably could defeat the Dark Lord Sauron, but would at the same time become a new Dark Lord.

3.1.3. Mankind

In Middle Earth, mankind is the most vulnerable race to the temptation of the Ring. They strive for power and want to use the Ring for their individual benefit, as well as for their fight against Sauron

One prominent example for one who cannot resist the temptation, is Boromir, the son of the steward of the kingdom Gondor and a member of the fellowship. Initially, he is a loyal follower of the ring-bearer, but gradually gets under the influence of the Ring. This can be seen at the end of “The Fellowship of the Ring”, when Boromir cries out that the ring should have been his, although he said only a few sentences earlier that he would only want to borrow it. Boromir thinks that he is strong enough to control the Ring and to use it for Gondor, although he has been told that the Ring can only be used for Evil. His Sin is

hubris, reminiscent of the story of the Tower of Babel in the Bible, describing the hubris of mankind.

Does Boromir’s fall prove that Sin is inevitably interlaced with human life?
Not for Tolkien. Aragorn, the heir to the throne of Gondor and also a member of the fellowship, resists the temptation, as he knows and understands that no one but Sauron can control the Ring. Furthermore, even Boromir’s brother Faramir resists the temptation, even though he does not know any details about the Ring, but feels its danger.

3.1.4. Hobbits
The hobbits are the most resistent to the One Ring of all races in Tolkien’s world. They live in the Shire, a small isolated country with almost no contact to the other parts of Middle Earth and their ongoing fights. Small in their physical stature, their innocence and naïvety makes them strong against the negative influence of the Ring. Consequently, Tolkien selects the hobbits Bilbo and later his nephew Frodo as ring-bearers.
But hobbits are not sinless. They almost completely resist the temptation to possess the Ring, but when they have to bear it, even the hobbits gradually fall under its influence, though still much slower than any of the other races. The best example is Gollum, a distant relative of the hobbits of the Shire. Gollum carried the Ring for a long time, so that in the end, the Ring had completely overtaken his mind. Gollum’s, as well as Frodo’s and Bilbo’s Sin is the greed to possess the Ring, but they do not want to use it for their personal power.

3.1.5. Elves
In “The Lord of the Rings”, elves do not sin. For example, Galadriel, a queen of elves, knows of the power as well as the dangers of the One Ring, and when offered it by the ring-bearer Frodo, she, like Gandalf, liberately refuses to take it. But in the world of Tolkien, elves have sinned before. In the Silmarillion, which describes the history of Middle Earth, Tolkien tells a story reminiscent of the fratricide of Kain and Abel in the Bible. This results in the banishment of the elves from the Undying Lands of the gods, a story with obvious parallels to the narration how Adam and Eve were driven out of Paradise in the Bible.

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3.2. **Redemption in “The Lord of the Rings”**

The central and ultimate Redemption in “The Lord of the Rings” is the destruction of the One Ring in the fires of Mount Doom, where it was forged. Together with the doom of the Ring and all its power, Sauron perishes, as he had put a huge part of his existence into the Ring. Exemplarily, the Redemption can be seen in the liberation of the slaves of Sauron, like the trolls and those men under the control of Sauron, which immediately stop fighting after the Ring and Sauron are destroyed.\(^{29}\)

Although the Ring was brought to Mount Doom by the ring-bearer Frodo to be destroyed, Frodo finally fails and succumbs to the power of the Ring. He fights with Gollum over the Ring, Gollum stumbles and falls into the fires, taking the Ring with him towards destruction.

The figure Frodo shows some parallels to Jesus Christ, as he “bears the Ring” and with it the Sin of Middle Earth, like Christ carried the Cross and the Sin of the world. In contrast to Jesus Christ, Frodo fails in the end to sacrifice himself. In his stead, Gollum is sacrificed, and therefore defeats Sin and Evil with his death. Interestingly, by his sacrifice Gollum becomes the unwilling redeemer for Middle Earth.

The idea of a biblical Messiah, a new king that comes to save the world, can be found in the figure Aragorn, the heir to the throne of Gondor. Many of the expectations of Tolkien’s Messiah show parallels to the biblical Messiah, such as the healing hands of the king,\(^{30}\) or the White Tree, that will bloom again when the King comes.

The main consequences of Redemption in Middle Earth (the destruction of the One Ring) are the re-constitution of the kingdom Gondor as well as freedom and peace for Middle Earth.


Conclusion

Both in the Bible and in “The Lord of the Rings”, Sin originates from a fall from grace. In contrast to the Bible, in “The Lord of the Rings”, life isn’t inevitably interlaced with Sin, as the One Ring represents Sin and Evil, which seem to vanish with the destruction of the One Ring.

The reign of Aragorn in Gondor is reminiscent of the biblical motive of the Messiah as a just king (see Isaiah 11) and the description of Minas Tirith, the capital of the kingdom Gondor reminds of the new Jerusalem, the Holy city of the Revelation (Revelation 21). Like in the Bible, the reign of the king stands for a time of regained Paradise and of healing of diseases. (see Isaiah 35) A symbol for the healing of nature in “The Lord of the Rings” is the bloom of the White Tree.

The ring-bearer Frodo’s role in “The Lord of the Rings” is reminiscent of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross in the Bible. In this sense, “ring-bearer” can be seen as an analogy to Jesus, “the Lamb of God, which taketh away the Sin of the world.” (St. John 1,29) Frodo takes responsibility to bring the Ring to Mount Doom to destroy it, knowing that this means his personal death. But in contrast to Jesus, he fails in the end. Ironically, the Sinner Gollum is the one who finally destroys the Ring with his unwilling sacrifice, bringing Redemption for Middle Earth.

The battles between Sauron’s forces and the free races of Middle Earth show parallels to the apocalyptical visions in the Book of Daniel and in the Book of Revelation.

In the Bible, Redemption is always ultimately brought by God, but in “The Lord of the Rings”, the only intervention of the gods is the sending of the wizards, the rest of the responsibility lies with the races of Middle Earth.

It should be mentioned that although I concentrated on the parallels to the Bible, most of these motives are also found in mythologies like the Edda, the Nibelungs, the Kalevala or the Ilias, that certainly influenced Tolkien’s work.

Ultimately, in contrast to the Bible and Christian beliefs, in “The Lord of the Rings” Redemption is brought within time, not at a point at the end of time. It is furthermore secularised as there is almost no intervention from any gods. This is probably one of the reasons for the popularity of Tolkien’s “The Lord of the Rings”. In Middle Earth, one does not have to wait until after death or the Resurrection to experience Redemption.
Literature

Primary literature


Secondary literature


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