

# Harry Potter, a Christ Figure

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Since the release of the first novel in 1997, J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series has met with controversy in the Christian world, the Orthodox sphere included. Its critics oppose what they regard as an anti-Christian encouragement of magic. Its defenders stress the moral themes in the books, and highlight various resonances with the gospel.<sup>1</sup> The series can and has been read in many different ways, a fact that shows its complexity and richness. In interpreting it here from a Christian perspective, my purpose may not seem very original. But what I would like to show is somewhat more specific: I will claim that the character Harry Potter is a striking and significant Christ figure. More precisely, I will claim that he can be interpreted as a literary *typos* of Christ.

## Conquering Death and Evil with Love

Rowling has stated that the main theme of *Harry Potter* is death.<sup>2</sup> Death and human attitudes to it are indeed very important to the main plot. Harry Potter cannot be killed by his nemesis, Lord Voldemort, because his mother protects him by her death. In the final book, he freely accepts death. Voldemort, on the contrary, fears death above all, and creates magical protection against it (in the form of the so-called horcruxes) by killing others. His followers have the numinous ti-

tle of "death eaters." In chapter 16 of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Harry finds on his parents' tombstone the inscription "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death," a quotation of 1 Cor. 15:26—though the author prefers to let us discover this ourselves—and Harry seems to misunderstand this phrase as expressing a death eater's desire to escape bodily death. Harry is tempted by pursuit of the "deathly hallows," which are said to protect from death, but in the end he decides to pursue the horcruxes instead, in order to destroy Voldemort's abusive power over life and death. His last task is to let himself be killed by Voldemort, but he returns to life.

Another theme that spans all the books in the series is that of love being more powerful than magic, evil, and even death. Harry's strength lies in his love of others: his parents, his godfather, and his friends. Voldemort's weakness, on the other hand, is that he despises love, friendship and devotion. His incapacity to love and to understand love brings about his downfall.

Even from this very brief summary of the main plot, it becomes clear that Harry Potter may be understood as a Christ figure. At the same time, we are not far from the realm of fairy tales and modern fantasy. Before showing this in more detail, however, I will ex-

<sup>1</sup> John Granger, *Looking for God in Harry Potter*, 2nd ed. (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2006) and Colin Manlove, *The Order of Harry Potter: Literary Skill in the Hogwarts Epic* (Hamden, CT: Winged Lion Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> J. K. Rowling interviewed by Geordie Greig, *The Tatler*, January 10, 2006.

plain in what sense this Christ typology should be understood.

### A Literary Christ Figure

Christ figures in literature are akin to Christ figures (or “types”) in the Old Testament and in mythology.<sup>3</sup> A biblical Christ figure is a person (such as Abel, Joseph, or Job), an animal (the paschal lamb, Abraham’s scapegoat), a thing (the manna, the rock), or an image (the bridegroom in the Song of Songs) that prefigures Christ in certain aspects, or can be seen as a “draft” or an anticipatory “shadow” of him. In the Gospels, Christ speaks about Jonah as a “sign” (Matt. 12:39). Jonah descends into the obscurity of the fish’s belly and comes out again three days later, thus prefiguring the death and the resurrection of Christ. There are other aspects of Jonah’s character, however, that are inconsis-

tent with the characteristics of Christ: he opposes the will of God, he lacks charity for his enemies, and so forth. A Christ figure does not have to be Christlike in every respect.

The Old Testament Christ figures were prophetic: the Church recognizes them as having been inspired by the Holy Spirit, who prepared the elect people of God for Christ’s historical arrival through the writing of holy Scripture.<sup>4</sup> They render Christ present beyond the boundaries of time and space, in material form and in the realm of human imagination. They are instances of the very concrete presence of God, a kind of theophany. For example, Saint Paul writes concerning the rock of Moses: “the rock was Christ” (1 Cor. 10:4). The rock as a figure manifested him and thus partook in the person of Christ.

There are also Christ figures in mythology, which were recognized as such by early Christians: Dionysus, Osiris, Orpheus, Apollo, various gods who die and are resurrected, and even certain mythological animals such as the phoenix. In the case of pagan mythology, we can suppose that in each culture and religion there is a quest for God that finds a more or less partial answer, some form of inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Christ is prefigured in the “shadow” of the law, the history, and the mythology (that is, the symbolic narratives) of both the chosen people and other religions. These human concepts or mental images *were* Christ, and are still, in a mysterious way.

Then there are figures of Christ in literature, that is, characters whose Christian “face” is developed in a more or less conscious manner by the author and who represent Christ prophetically, even if in less direct

<sup>3</sup> Christine Downing, “Typology and the Literary Christ-Figure: A Critique,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 36.1 (March 1968): 13–27.

<sup>4</sup> John Breck, *Scripture in Tradition: The Bible and Its Interpretation in the Orthodox Church* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 2001).

Christ as Helios.  
Necropolis under  
Saint Peter’s Basilica,  
Rome, third century.





way than Scripture. If pagan mythology—so clearly rejected for its other aspects, such as idolatry—was considered to be inspired, we can likewise consider fiction as a form of revelation of Christ through human imagination. According to Mircea Eliade, modern fiction, such as literature and film, has taken over the function of myth to express and convey archetypes. This often happens unconsciously.<sup>5</sup> In a desacralized culture, the presence of ancient myths may help explain the enormous success of this kind of literature and film. An author's personal faith is not always relevant in this process. If his or her imagination is saturated by Christian culture, the author can take the Christ figure from modern culture's general pool of inspiration; it belongs to the European intertextuality. Still, intertextuality does not explain everything. Christ has become an archetype of the collective unconscious in Carl Jung's sense, as Eliade also pointed out. The fact that this has happened *after* the incarnation chronologically does not weaken the typological character: if anything, it strengthens it as a supplementary source of inspiration.

Another approach, similar to Eliade's but from a different school of thought, is also relevant to this analysis: the school of thought developed by J.

R. R. Tolkien and, by extension, the group of writers calling themselves the Inklings, of whom Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and Charles Williams are the best known.<sup>6</sup> Other critics have already identified the Inklings as potential precursors to Rowling. The Inklings are especially known for their works of fiction, which include Christ figures such as Aslan from *The Chronicles of Narnia* (Lewis), the god of the mountain in *Till We Have Faces* (Lewis), and Frodo or Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien).

Tolkien and Lewis put the writer of modern fantasy in the same category as the authors of traditional fairy tales, as a creator of myths. Such a writer imaginatively gives life to truths hidden in "God's thought," thus becoming by participation—knowingly or not—a "sub-creator."<sup>8</sup> Such an act of creation can be seen as a kind of prophetic inspiration. For Tolkien, fairy tales and fantasy stories belong to the same tradition if they imply reparation of evil and some form of final consolation, which he calls an "eu-catastrophe," that is, a happy reversal of evil into good that provokes joy. This literary creation is, he claims, a form of literary gospel. He grants to literary fantasy the role of continuing the revelation of the "greatest eu-catastrophe" in history: the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son of God.

Christ as Orpheus. Catacomb of Domitilla, Rome, third or fourth century.

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<sup>5</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Mythes, rêves et mystères* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), 21–39.

<sup>6</sup> See J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, (London: Unwin Books, 1964).

<sup>7</sup> Travis Prinzi, *Harry Potter & Imagination: The Way Between Two Worlds* (Allentown, PA: Zossima Press, 2009), 1–24 and Manlove, *The Order of Harry Potter*, ch. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 25.

I claim that this sort of literary inspiration may sometimes resemble the prophetic inspiration that gave us biblical and mythological Christ figures, even if it is more obscure and subjective in its substance. But what is nearer the fantasy eu-catastrophe than a literary Christ figure, a hero who dies and is believed lost, comes to life again, vanquishes death and evil, and saves his world? In *Harry Potter*, the author “sub-creates” a literary Christ figure that emerges from her inspired imagination.

Rowling gives readers a hint in *The Deathly Hallows* that fairy tales and fantasy can reveal truth better than other literary forms. The truth about the wrong way to conquer death is revealed by the fairy tale “The Three Brothers.” It cannot be through the fear of death and the quest for power, which are Voldemort’s methods. Voldemort despises fairy tales and is only interested in the invincible wand in order to gain absolute power over life and death. Rowling makes a case for the power of fantasy, opening the way for us to the Christ figure interpretation of her hero.

### Character Blur

I have already mentioned the essential points of the Christ figure theme in *Harry Potter*: love more powerful than evil and voluntary death and resurrection to save the world. These points are essential because they refer to the person of Christ and to his work of salvation. As in other cases of Christ figures in literature, there is a certain character blur. *Harry Potter* does not stand alone as a Christ figure: he stands in the center, but shares this quality with other characters, mainly with his mother Lily and with the wizard Dumbledore. The story is also punctuated by the significant appear-

ance of an early Christian Christ figure, the phoenix, which helps Harry in crucial moments. All these figures are involved in the loving sacrifice that, in Rowling’s story, saves the world. Lily is a key character, as it is her sacrifice which saves Harry at least three times from Voldemort’s killing curse.

Harry fights evil through the power of love, which is stronger than dark magic (that is, power-abusive, person-despising magic). Voldemort is defeated because he does not comprehend this (*Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, chapter 20). Love takes different forms in the series. Firstly, Harry is magically marked with this love by the sacrifice of his mother (*Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, chapter 17), and he refuses to play along with Voldemort’s rendering evil for evil, as his preferred defense is the disarming spell “Expelliarmus.” At the end of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Harry is healed by the phoenix and can defeat Voldemort because of his loyalty to Dumbledore. At the end of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Harry, moved by merciful love, permits the traitor Wormtail to escape and thus to remain in his debt, a fact that saves his life in *Deathly Hallows*, as Wormtail in turn has mercy on Harry (chapter 23). Merciful love, which is deemed weakness by Voldemort, thus ultimately conquers treachery and hate. At the end of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Voldemort has to renounce penetrating Harry’s mind because he cannot bear the force of friendship or affection he senses in it. The theme of love mightier than death associated with Harry is biblical, recalling the relationship between bridegroom and bride in expressed in the Song of Songs (8:6).

Finally and above all, like Christ, Harry has the greatest kind of love, the

one that enables him to “lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). This love can be associated with another Christian theme, the inversion expressed in the biblical statements “my power is made perfect in weakness” and “the last will be first” (2 Cor. 12:9–10 and Matt. 20:16). This theme is directly connected to the paradox of incarnation, because it applies in the first place to Christ, who “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant” (Phil. 2:7).

As in the case of Christ, however, this inversion cannot be achieved without the vanquishing of temptation. For Harry, temptation appears at each stage—beginning with the Mirror of Erised in *Philosopher’s Stone*, which would put self-centered desire before everything else—but becomes more concrete in *Deathly Hallows*, when Harry is tempted by the quest for the invincible wand which would enable him, as the story of the Three Brothers tells, to cheat death and to become immortal. The invincible “elder wand” is what Voldemort in his lust for absolute power is seeking. Harry finally conquers this desire to follow Voldemort on his own ground. His understanding of the necessity of sacrifice, his lonely walk to death, strongly recalls Christ’s prayer in Gethsemane (Luke 4:1–13). We can also hear an echo of Mark 9:35 in this opposition between preserving one’s life at all costs and freely sacrificing it.

Finally, Harry understands that Voldemort’s power cannot be ended and the world saved if he, Harry, survives; this is because of the portion of Voldemort’s soul that is attached to him. Rowling perhaps wants us to see an evocation of Christ carrying our infirmities (Isaiah 53:4–5), of Christ assuming fallen human nature. Harry’s sacrificial death is prepared by

other “symbolic” deaths in the previous books. But it is in the last book that Harry truly dies—even though he does not “go on” to the afterlife—and comes back again, thus obeying a father figure, Professor Dumbledore. Dumbledore’s explanation in the chapter “King’s Cross” (and here the mention of the word “cross” is probably significant) as to why Harry must not “go on” boils down to this: not only is Harry bound to Voldemort by the piece of Voldemort’s soul he carries within himself, but Voldemort is bound to Harry by the blood Voldemort took from him, which carries Lily’s sacrificial love. And as sacrificial love is stronger than greed for power and fear of death, Harry wins this battle and comes back to life. Incidentally, it is Snape’s love for the same Lily that leads him to work against Voldemort, assuring the success of Dumbledore’s plan. The character of Lily participates, again, in Harry’s Christ figure role.

Harry thus conquers death by death. By dying, he destroys the horcrux that he carries within himself and stops Voldemort from hurting others. This happens also because Lily’s sacrifice, which he carries in his blood, is now a power turned definitively against Voldemort. Voldemort is finally killed by his own killing curse, incapable to the end of understanding the deeper powers of magic, which are grounded, we are told again in the last chapter, in sacrificial love (Harry’s, Lily’s, Dumbledore’s, Snape’s, and Dobby’s). Harry’s resurrection is not the natural consequence of this love from God, or of a divine nature—like Christ’s—but a free choice; here the parallel is not so close. It is nevertheless a resurrection, a reversal from evil to good as the mythical eu-catastrophe described by Tolkien, or, as the prophecy in Lewis’s *Narnia*

affirms: “Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight.”

Harry’s death and resurrection resembles Christ’s in another respect: it recalls the early Christian imagery of the hook and bait. The devil thinks himself conqueror because he sees God hidden in flesh; divine nature is hidden like the hook in the bait. Voldemort thinks Harry defeated but he, Voldemort, is taken in, in his blindness, as to the source of Harry’s power: the sacrificial love hidden inside him. The hidden “bait” is not another nature: the parallel does not go this far, but it goes far enough. The fact that Harry’s death and resurrection do not entirely resemble Christ’s is not an argument against the Christ figure interpretation. We saw that even in the Old Testament, a Christ figure does not in the least need to share all Christ’s characteristics.

### Against Allegory

Despite its Christ figure theme, I do not believe *Harry Potter* should be forced into a vast Christian allegory, as John Granger does. As in scriptural exegesis, typology is different from allegory.<sup>9</sup> In an allegorical story, the narrative may be less important in itself. An allegorical exegesis of a text does not much respect its concrete meaning. If we were to interpret a literary text as a gospel allegory, we would take each

element of the narrative as signifying a detail of the life of Christ or that of the Christian endeavoring to achieve deification (as in Granger’s analysis).<sup>10</sup> On the contrary, if we follow the approach of typology, only some features would point to Christ, while the characters and the action would retain their consistency and their other meanings.

Allegory is “platonic” in essence, as it shows a certain disrespect for the material (fictional) world, but typology is conceptually more Christian because it finds metaphysical meanings in things without detracting from their reality. In his incarnation, Christ was humble and discreet, coming not as a king but as a servant. He does not break down the door, but waits on the doorstep of a story and knocks, ready for us to hear—or not. This is what typological exegesis does: it opens an unobtrusive door in the story for those who are prepared to see it. And this is what happens as well in myths, fairy tales, and modern fantasy narratives.

Christ’s image thus reveals itself in the character of Harry Potter and some of the related characters, but does not substitute itself for the story. We can still enjoy the page-turning action, the delightful fantasy inventions, the witty satire of our own world, the manifold intertextual references to earlier literature, and the thrill, mystery, and humor of a good story. ✱

<sup>9</sup> Breck, *Scripture in Tradition*.

<sup>10</sup> Downing, “Typology and the Literary Christ-Figure.”



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