

Harry Potter

AND THE MESSIANIC LEGACY

*Christian thematic influences on the imagery and
character of J.K Rowling's boy wizard hero*

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Commonly used texts will be referred to by abbreviations after their initial reference in the body. 'Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix' will be cited as 'Phoenix', and 'Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows' will be cited as 'Hallows'. Biblical references are given in their traditional notation of Book, Chapter, Verse (e.g.: Mark 1:10-11).

1. Introduction

In the *Harry Potter* series of novels by J.K Rowling, the title character of Harry can be linked with the Messianic element present in Western culture, as an expression of both the Christian Messianic tradition exemplified by Jesus Christ, and the Jewish Messianic tradition from which Christianity sprang. It can thus be argued that Harry Potter exists as a Messianic figure within children's literature, and that the novels which feature the character can therefore be seen and read with the themes that both Christian and Jewish religious traditions embody; themes of salvation, sacrifice, conquest and the destruction and defeat of evil.

With *Harry Potter*, Rowling has written what many reviewers have referred to as a publishing sensation. Her books have sold over 500 million copies (Rich and Bosman, *Harry Potter's Final Act Is Set for July 21*, 2/2/2007; BBC Online, *Harry Potter finale sales hit 11m*, 23/7/2007), and continue to sell strongly after the entire series is now complete and published. The book's hero, the eponymous Harry Potter, has become recognised and beloved by many thousands of children and adults worldwide.

Fame brings a certain amount of notoriety, however, and the *Harry Potter* books are definitely not flying under the radar. With their incorporation of magic and the practice thereof, they have (perhaps naturally) aroused the ire of many in the fundamentalist community. Many Christian writers have called Rowling to task for her use of magic as the

vehicle that propels her action. Ken James on ChristianAnswers.com writes that the problem with Rowling is that "witchcraft is not fantasy; it is a sinful reality in our world". (James, *Is "Harry Potter" Harmless?*, 2001). He goes on to say: “

"This is a true representation of witchcraft, and the black arts, and black magic. And yet we have people that say this is merely fantasy and harmless reading for our children. Actually, what makes this more dangerous is that it is couched in fantasy language, and children's literature, and made to be humorous, and beautifully written and extremely provocative reading. And it just opens up children to want to have the next one. This is what is so harmful." (James, 2001).

This view, although not universal, is widely held amongst particularly fundamentalist readers of the novels. As Deborah Taub and Heather Servaty write, "Most religious objections to the magic the *Harry Potter* books are based on various passages of scripture, most commonly Deuteronomy 18:9-12." (Taub & Servaty, *Controversial Content in Children's Literature: Is Harry Potter Harmful to Children*, p54) Kimbra Gish, writing from the perspective of a conservative Christian librarian, confirms this, stating that "there are many red flags in the Harry Potter books" (Gish, *Hunting Down Harry Potter: An Exploration of Religious Concerns About Children's Literature*, p267), and that the "portrayal [of wizardry as 'special and desirable] naturally concerns those who do not wish their children to become avidly interested in learning practices that they believe are an abomination to God." (Gish, p267).

Despite the damning opinions of many Christian conservatives, however, there are numerous parallels between Christian beliefs and imagery that can be seen within *Harry Potter*, with Rowling's novels sharing many common themes with Christian religious beliefs. Many Christian writers do acknowledge this, with the Cardinal George Pell, Archbishop of Sydney, writing in a review of the most recent volume, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, that "Harry

Potter fits [the] bill as hero... he also appeals to good young Christians" (Pell, *Hero Harry Fits the Bill*, 16/9/2007). Moderate views such as Pell's are, however, drowned out by the voices of the fundamentalists, who rail against the books from the pulpit (Landover Baptist Church, *The Make Believe World of Harry Potter Is Driving Children to the Edge of Insanity!* 2007) and who have organised mass burnings of *Harry Potter* volumes in protest of Rowling's apparent demonic agenda (BBC News, 'Satanic' *Harry Potter* books burnt, 31/12/2001).

The irony in these attitudes towards the *Harry Potter* books becomes apparent when the novels themselves are scrutinised in search of Christian themes. One of the primary themes adhered to by Christianity is the message of salvation and redemption; it is a defining concept of how Christianity describes the world and itself. It is therefore ironic to note that *Harry Potter* can be read as a specific tale of redemption and salvation through living sacrifice.

Themes of sacrifice, redemption and salvation cannot be said to be completely original to Christianity. Nevertheless, they form the core of the Christian faith, and that core can be described as the Messianic element in Christianity. The notion of the Messiah derives from the Judaic roots in which Christianity originated, and moved from those roots as the belief systems of early Christians coalesced and were ratified by ecumenical councils and common beliefs in the first centuries of the first millennia A.D, As can be seen in the Bible, and in analytical texts thereof, the Messianic crusade is that which deals with the life of the Jewish Mashiach or the Christian Messiah (Jones, *Joshua, the man they called Jesus*, p28), an anointed descendant of the Judaic King David. In Jewish tradition, this 'Anointed One' was intended to cleanse the land of the dark and evil opponents of the true believers in the God Yahweh, and return the earth to them as it had been promised to their ancestor Abraham. (Jones, p29; Genesis 22:17-19). The Christian Messiah moved outside this worldly tradition, becoming more a figure of spiritual salvation and sacrifice. Jesus, the Christian belief runs, was sent to Earth in order to die for the sins of humanity, after preaching a lesson of peace and love for

all human beings. This death and resurrection of the Christian Messiah is seen as the incident in which death itself was conquered, and is considered the defining theme and moment of the Christian faith. (Romans 6:5-12).

It is the theme of the Messianic figure that I have observed to be deeply seated within the *Harry Potter* universe, through both use of Messianic imagery, and through the actions and figures of many of Rowling's characters. It is this theme that I will examine, through an analysis of the books *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, in which, I believe, the theme of a Messianic figure and a Messianic crusade are not only apparent, but are vital to the success of the texts.

2. The Messianic Crusade

The beginnings of the Christian Messianic tale occur during the Gospels, in which the infant Jesus is born into a Jewish family of the first century (Matthew 1:18-25, Luke 2:6-8). He grows up to manhood in the province of Galilee, surrounded by family, before he begins his Messianic quest after encountering a figure that seems to move him to preach his own message. This figure is known to posterity as John the Baptist, and he is a figure that possesses a parallel in the world J. K Rowling has created.

John the Baptist, despite being revered in his own times (Luke 3:15-18), is a somewhat mysterious figure. He arises in the midst of a semi-dogmatic society, preaching the coming of the Kingdom and calling on sinners to repent, and to be baptised in water, symbolizing their repentance (Jones, p64; Numbers 19). Jesus, the Christian Messianic figure, is baptised by John and hears his message of repentance, before he begins to gather followers to himself. (Mark 1:16; Matthew 4:18) It is possible that Jesus' mission was somewhat inspired by John's, at the very least parallels can easily be drawn between them. Jesus observed a powerful preacher, with a crowd of disciples, conveying a message of repentance and salvation. It was after this that Jesus began his own mission, a mission that went further than John's, to a grisly end on a Roman cross. Regardless, the character of John the Baptist can be seen as a herald, someone who "makes clear the path" (Mark 1:1-6) and who dies, leaving the way clear for his 'successor' or his 'aspirant' to continue the path to the coming kingdom (Matthew 14:12). While reading *Harry Potter*, we encounter a figure that carries many of the same characteristics and meets much the same end as John - the character of Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts.

To describe Dumbledore as a Baptist-like figure may at first sound preposterous, but

the comparisons that can be drawn are seductive. Like John, Dumbledore has a core group of disciples who are committed to his message - in John's case the coming kingdom, in Dumbledore's case the defeat of Voldemort and the equality of Wizards and Muggles. (Rowling, *Phoenix*, p65). Dumbledore, like John, rails against the strictures of his society that he sees as unjust, for example: when Dumbledore repeatedly stands against the Ministry of Magic in their attempts to 'hush up' the truth of Lord Voldemort's return, and when he speaks for Harry in the name of justice (Rowling, *Phoenix*, p90; p135-138). Dumbledore, like John, inspires his successor (and ultimately, his superior) in his own quest, and also helps his successor find his path, with Dumbledore acting as a grandfatherly mentor figure to Harry, teaching him about himself and the wizarding world. Like John, Dumbledore is arrested by the legal forces of his world - John by Herod Antipas, and Dumbledore by Cornelius Fudge - for preaching against what the state considers to be lawful (Matthew 3:7-10, 4:12; Rowling, *Phoenix*, p546-7). Finally, like the Baptist, Dumbledore meets his end at the hands of the forces he spoke against, but in doing so inspires his protégé to take even further action and ultimately fulfill his mission (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, p604-5).

Identifying Dumbledore as John the Baptist necessitates the obvious - that in doing so, we can go on to identify Harry as Jesus. Here, perhaps, the Christian commentator will rebel. Harry cannot be Jesus, because he violates the strictures of Deuteronomy against wizardry (Deuteronomy 18:9-12), because he is a child and is unaware of his destiny, because he does not have the same purpose or destiny of self-sacrifice. These arguments ring false, however, when Harry's role is examined in the novels, and when the roles of his supporting peer group are similarly examined. In doing so, it can indeed be seen that there *are* parallels between Harry and Jesus - parallels that are deep seated within their characters and actions.

In the Gospels Jesus is drawn as a conflicting figure, nevertheless he is depicted as a man (or God) with a mission: preaching love and forgiveness and ultimately dying for that

message on behalf of humankind. Can Harry be said to do the same? Looking at his role in the books, I believe that Harry can. In *Phoenix*, we see Harry beginning to take his role as a leader, and also taking steps into the role as a chosen or prophesied champion - much as Jesus took such a role after his baptism by John. Harry, in rebellion against the powers of his world that are blocking what he believes to be an important cause - the defeat of Voldemort and the protection of the other students and citizens - gathers around him a group of friends who agree for him to lead and teach them what they need to know in order to protect themselves and others, and to defeat their satanic adversary (Rowling, *Phoenix*, p291; p301-309). In doing so, Rowling sets the stage for a confrontation between Harry's forces and Voldemort's Death Eaters that parallels the more Judaic Messianic traditions, but also parallels several Gospel incidents where Jesus and his disciples were forced into altercations with the state (Luke 19:45-7; Jones, p188).

Harry's prophesied role as the only one that can defeat Voldemort is a major theme towards the ending of *Phoenix*. Here a rather intriguing parallel can be drawn with the Gospel Messianic account - Harry is the only one who can possibly defeat Voldemort, who can readily be identified as the Satan presence in Rowling's world. Much like the Satan/Sammael figure of the Biblical tradition, Voldemort craves power over humanity, deals death and torture without remorse, is soulless and conscienceless in his treatment of living things. Voldemort, too, bears a rather interesting corollary to the theme of a death presence - his name, drawn from French, can be roughly translated as "flight from death" (Coffey, *French-English Dictionary*, 2007), which again links him with the presence of death in the text. Harry's opposition to Voldemort can be read as an opposition to the forces of death; he is prophesied to be the only one with the ability to defeat death. The Biblical references here are blatant; Jesus, according to Gospel account, is the being through which death shall be overcome for humanity; he is the being who will conquer the ever-present death for all time (1 Corinthians

15:20-24). Harry, like Jesus, is a being prophesied to be able to defeat the forces of death and darkness. Rowling herself, after the release of the seventh book, referred to Harry as being one who had mastered death, writing "the real master of Death [Harry] accepts that he must die, and that there are much worse things in the world of the living" (Rowling, *Online Chat Transcript* 30/7/2007). As Jesus mastered death by dying on the cross, Harry himself is declared to have achieved the same result.

The statement from Rowling does beg the question, how was it that Harry did master death? In this context, it must be assumed that it was in a similar sense to the mastery of death achieved by Jesus, i.e. through dying in order to give salvation to others. This argument at first glance must seem somewhat out of place when referring to *Harry Potter*, yet in analysing *Phoenix* and *Hallows* it can be seen that this is exactly the case. The first hints of this theme are present in *Phoenix* when Hermione asks Harry, "don't you think you've got a bit of a – a – a *saving-people thing?*" (Rowling, *Phoenix*, p646). This statement, although denied by Harry, hints at the fact that Harry will selflessly give his own life and risk his own self in order to be the saving figure to others - a theme that is present within the other books. (, *Harry Potter: Fairy Tale Prince, Real Boy, Archetypal Hero*, p109). This notion of being a figure of salvation is not necessarily linked to the same kind of salvation that Jesus offers in the Gospels - the salvation from death - but it does foreshadow a state of mind in Rowling's hero figure. This state of mind is however linked very closely with the Messianic tradition in *Hallows*, when Harry finally realises his fate after the death of Severus Snape. He observes fragments of Snape's mind, and discovers what he had suspected for some time: that he must die in order for Voldemort to be vanquished (Rowling, *Hallows*, p554).

The discovery of his fated death creates an intriguingly close analogy between Harry and Jesus. In the Gospel account, the night before his arrest and following crucifixion, Jesus and his disciples are present in the garden of Gethsemane, where a rather emotional scene is

played out. Jesus is depicted as praying desperately for God to take away the necessity for his death, if it is at all possible to change the path that he must tread, saying, "Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me" (Matthew 26:39). Yet, after praying and after sweating what one Gospel author describes as "like great drops of blood," such is his anguish (Luke 22:43), Jesus says "yet, not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42; Matthew 26:39-40). In *Hallows*, immediately after discovering the truth of his destiny, Harry sits in the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts and finally faces the truth of what he must do. For a brief time he rails, almost anguished against the fate that has brought him here, and at those who have contrived to make it come to pass:

"Dumbledore had known that Harry would not duck out, that he would keep going to the end, even though it was his end, because he had taken the trouble to get to know him... Dumbledore knew, as Voldemort knew, that Harry would not let anyone else die for him now that he had discovered it was in his power to stop it" (Rowling, Hallows, p 556).

Despite this, Harry realises in the end what Jesus realised, that it must be done. As Rowling writes, Harry steels himself for his own destiny. "[Harry realised] the hard surface of the incontrovertible truth, which was that he must die" (Rowling, *Hallows*, p557). Like Jesus, Harry accepts the truth as he goes forth to confront Death, in the presence of Voldemort, to spare the lives of others so that they too may overcome Death's power. It is here that Harry is again linked with Jesus; when he realises that he is about to die Harry gains true mastery of death - by accepting it, it holds no power over him. As he realises this Harry is able to call forth the spirits of his departed family who accompany him to his end. This again mirrors the Jesus narrative, where his mother and several of his closest loved ones accompany the Christian Messiah at his crucifixion until he dies, and in doing so overcomes death (John

19:25-26).

No Christian Messianic tale would be complete without a resurrection scene in which the mastery and defeat of death is demonstrated, and *Harry Potter* is no exception. Although he does die from Voldemort's killing curse (Rowling, *Hallows*, p564) he enters a limbo-like state at an ethereal King's Cross station, where he is given the choice of leaving the world or of returning to it. He chooses the latter and he is told by the spirit of Albus Dumbledore, "I think... that if you choose to return, there is a chance that [Voldemort] may be finished for good" (Rowling, *Hallows*, p578). Harry realises that to truly defeat the forces of Death in his world he must confront them, and show them to be no more. He realises that "leaving this place would not be nearly as hard as walking into the Forest had been, but it was warm and light and peaceful here" (Rowling, *Hallows*, p579). Harry returns to the world of the living, triumphant over the forces of death, and finally vanquishes the living presence of Death, Lord Voldemort (Rowling, *Hallows*, p596). Harry has died to save those he loves, as he himself states "I was ready to die to stop you hurting these people... and that's what did it" (Rowling, *Hallows*, p591). Like the Christian Jesus, Harry was willing to die for those whom he loved most, to save them from the pain and agony of Death, and in doing so he defeated it and rose again.

3. A Crisis of Faith

To the fundamentalist or conservative Christian mind, the notion that Harry Potter can at all be considered to be analogous to Jesus Christ, especially in the context of both acting out the role of a Christian Messianic figure must of necessity be considered ridiculous at best, perhaps even heretical. Yet as my study has noted, there are deep-seated parallels to the Christian Messianic tradition present within Rowling's novels. Even more revealing, in her most recent book tour, when interviewed by a reporter for MTV news, Rowling admitted that her work does contain fundamental Christian themes:

"To me [the religious parallels have] always been obvious," she said. "But I never wanted to talk too openly about it because I thought it might show people who just wanted the story where we were going."

and further:

"If she was worried about tipping her hand narratively in the earlier books, she clearly wasn't by the time Harry visits his parents' graves in Chapter 16 of "Deathly Hallows," titled "Godric's Hollow." On his parents' tombstone he reads the quote "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death," while on another tombstone (that of Dumbledore's mother and sister) he reads, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Adler, 'Harry Potter Author J.K Rowling Opens Up About Books' Christian Imagery, 17/10/2007).

Rowling has acknowledged the use of Christian imagery and direct Biblical quotation. The two quotations mentioned upon the tombstones in *Hallows* are an actual saying spoken by the

Christian Jesus (Matthew 6:19), and the second excerpted from the Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 15:26).

Harry Potter is not alone in being a fantasy literary piece with allusions or direct references to Christian tradition. Rowling has often been mentioned and has herself admitted to be writing in the tradition of the 'Inklings', the group of scholars from Oxford in the mid twentieth century that included J.R.R Tolkien and C.S Lewis amongst their members (McVeigh, *Is Harry Potter Christian?* 2002). It can unquestionably be stated that both Tolkien and Lewis wrote Christian themes into their works. Lewis, in his *Chronicles of Narnia*, specifically tells the tale of the saviour Aslan, who like Jesus sacrifices his own life for others and is brought back to life. Aslan is specifically linked to an actual allegorical figure of Jesus, with Lewis writing in a letter: "By the bye, children of 6 or 7, if brought up in Christian homes, usually know who Aslan is quite as quickly as their elders" (Fuller *et. al*, *Myth, Allegory and Gospel*, p147). Tolkien's work was by his own admission a Catholic and fundamentally religious one (Nelson, *The Gospel According to Lewis*, 2002), although Tolkien, unlike Lewis, avoided biblical allegory but rather created a world:

"...in which hope, the ultimate Christian virtue, is woven into the fundamental nature of reality--in which, as Frodo and Sam approach the end of all things, it makes sense for them to renounce the power that would enslave and instead submit to the power that frees" (Nelson, 2002).

Rowling's writing of *Harry Potter* as a Messianic text is not an original one in Western fantasy literature, rather it follows rather neatly in the footsteps of authors such as Lewis and Tolkien. Rowling's scope of work even matches a similar volume number to Lewis', and her underlying themes are very much related to his, in the actions of her hero and the notions of salvation and resurrection her books espouse. Yet Rowling, unlike Lewis and Tolkien, is anathemic to

the traditional Christian community because of the strong emphasis on the fun and playful aspects of magic - which as discussed earlier are considered to contradict Biblical teaching. (Deuteronomy 18:9-12)

Is this a fair categorisation of a work that otherwise, in the vein of Tolkien and Lewis, can be read as a moving and deep seated Christian-themed work? Especially considering that both Tolkien and Lewis have their magical elements, with Tolkien's wizard Gandalf being a prime magical mover, and Lewis possessing a cast of good magic-using wizards as well as evil magical witches (Lewis, *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, p318; Lewis, *Prince Caspian*, p147). Michael Nelson writes, "Tolkien, like Lewis and Rowling, offers his young readers a 'pre-baptism of the child's imagination.'" (Nelson, 2002), Christian writers such as James and Gish, however, do not share this opinion.

Ultimately in writing *Harry Potter*, Rowling has presented the child reader of today with a story that is enriched by the presence of a fundamental theme of Western Christianity. Despite the anger present at her work in the religious community, it should be acknowledged by both a reading of the text and the author's own admissions, that *Harry Potter* presents the reader a story that enmeshes the Messianic themes of Christianity, themes of hope, resurrection, salvation and sacrifice, and does so in the midst of a tale of sorcery, wizardry, and schoolboy heroism (McVeigh, 2002). Using the character of Harry himself and the world in which he resides, Rowling has conveyed the themes of the Messiah to the modern reader - whether the followers of the traditional Christian Messiah of Jesus agree or not.

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