

# GANDALF: THE PROPHETIC MENTOR

Zak Schmoll on the Defeat of Sauron

Near the beginning of the Third Age of Middle-earth, the Valar commissioned the Istari as representatives from the Maiar to resist Sauron's rise. Of the five chosen, only Olórin, better known as Gandalf, remained true to his mission until the end. As he tells the newly enthroned Aragorn, "The Third Age was my age. I was the Enemy of Sauron; and my work is finished."<sup>1</sup> His opposition to Sauron is publicly displayed while standing outside the walls of Minas Tirith or at the Black Gate. On the battlefield, he drew his sword to strike down the servants of the enemy, but Gandalf's most significant strike to the enemy happened prior to these final battles. This essay will explore Gandalf as a prophetic mentor who defeated Sauron long before

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<sup>1</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002), 971.

the actual downfall of Barad-dûr by guiding Hobbits in the ways of pity.

The many names of Gandalf will be utilized throughout this essay interchangeably, and they can be found in a memory Faramir shares with Frodo. "Many are my names in many countries, he said. Mithrandir among the Elves, Tharkûn to the Dwarves; Olórin I was in my youth in the West that is forgotten, in the South Incánus, in the North Gandalf; to the East I go not."<sup>2</sup>

Little is said about Olórin in *The Silmarillion*, but the reader is given a small glimpse into his character. He is described as being the "wisest" Maiar who put "fair visions or the promptings of wisdom" into the hearts of the Elves in Lorien.<sup>3</sup> He is also described as spending a great good time with the Valar Nienna, "and of her he learned pity and patience."<sup>4</sup> Nienna's position among the Valar is unique as she lived alone and "is acquainted with grief, and mourns for every wound that Arda has suffered in the marring of Melkor . . . But she does not weep for herself; and those who hearken to her learn

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<sup>2</sup> Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 670.

<sup>3</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1977), 18.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

pity, and endurance in hope."<sup>5</sup> Even before he comes to Middle-earth as Gandalf, he is already cultivating the value of pity within himself.

Pity becomes such an essential characteristic of Gandalf that he tells Frodo that if he were to succumb to the Ring's power, it would be through pity. He says, "Yet the way of the Ring to my heart is by pity, pity for weakness and the desire of strength to do good. Do not tempt me! I dare not take it, not even to keep it safe, unused."<sup>6</sup> As Bradley Birzer points out about the Ring's allure, "Other characters become tempted by it throughout the story: Galadriel, Boromir, and Denethor, to name just a few. The former resists, the latter two fail, and it proves their ultimate undoing."<sup>7</sup> Gandalf knows the Ring will attempt to twist one's greatest strength into one's greatest downfall. Pity is so central to Gandalf's identity that he realizes he must not allow his strength to be a vulnerability.

As the Istari arrive in Middle-earth to oppose Sauron, who seems to be rising again after the Ring was cut from his hand, one of their primary

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<sup>5</sup> Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 61.

<sup>7</sup> Bradley J. Birzer, *J. R. R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth: Understanding Middle-earth* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2009), chap. 5, Digital Edition.

responsibilities is "to move Elves and Men and all living things of good will to valiant deeds."<sup>8</sup> Gandalf does this powerfully by continually urging the White Council to assault Sauron in Dol Guldur and free Mirkwood of his oppressive presence. The White Council's confrontation did not ultimately defeat Sauron, who had already been preparing to withdraw to the land of Mordor. Despite motivating the powerful to valiant deeds, those valiant deeds do not start the chain of events that ultimately lead to Sauron's destruction. The final downfall of Sauron begins in earnest with the delivery of an unexpected invitation to an ordinary Hobbit.

Just before assaulting Dol Guldur, Gandalf knocks on a round, green door. "I am looking for someone to share in an adventure that I am arranging, and it's very difficult to find anyone."<sup>9</sup> Despite being "good-morninged by Belladonna Took's son, as if [he were] selling buttons at the door," he persistently pushes Bilbo to consider going on an adventure to the Lonely Mountain.<sup>10</sup> While Bilbo lists all the reasons that adventures are

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<sup>8</sup> Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 309.

<sup>9</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1995), 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

miserable, Gandalf persuades him to consider going because it will be "very good for you — and profitable too, very likely, if you ever get over it."<sup>11</sup> Gandalf implies that this adventure will result in more than just financial benefits. Although the story remained unfinished by J.R.R. Tolkien, in *The Quest for Erebor*, Gandalf appears to be concerned that as Bilbo grew older, "he was getting rather greedy and fat, and his old desires had dwindled down to a sort of private dream."<sup>12</sup> Someone in that condition would undoubtedly benefit from being given a slight push out of the door.

As the story progresses, Bilbo indeed does grow in a variety of ways. He burglarizes trolls, fights spiders, sneaks his companions out of Elvish prison, bravely ventures into Smaug's lair, and stands up to Thorin's belligerent resistance to sharing any of his treasure. He becomes stronger, cleverer, and wiser. Gandalf notices this near the end of the story, as they are returning to Bag End, and remarks, "Something is the matter with you! You are not the hobbit that you were."<sup>13</sup> Immediately before this statement,

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<sup>11</sup> Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 6.

<sup>12</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales of Numenor and Middle-earth*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1980), 308.

<sup>13</sup> Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 302.

Bilbo is reciting a poem that begins, "Roads go ever ever on," a clear nod to the new spirit that has grown within him.<sup>14</sup> Rather than trying to avoid adventures altogether, he has learned that the road really does go on forever. While there is a comfort to returning home, as the verse concludes, that does not mean the adventure ends absolutely at its seeming completion. Stratford Caldecott summarizes, "Not only is Bilbo himself transformed by his adventures, but he also becomes a transformative influence on others, a catalyst for spiritual growth."<sup>15</sup> This adventure has more benefit than simply the small amount of treasure he brought home from the Lonely Mountain. Looking back on the events of Bilbo's inclusion in The Quest for Erebor, Gandalf concludes, "I knew in my heart that Bilbo must go with him, or the whole quest would be a failure — or, as I should say now, the far more important events by the way would not come to pass."<sup>16</sup> Gandalf's sentiment is a clear allusion to the finding of the Ring and its destruction that was brought nearer by Bilbo reaching around in the dark.

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<sup>14</sup> Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 302.

<sup>15</sup> Stratford Caldecott, *The Power of the Ring: The Spiritual Vision Behind the Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2012), chap. 2, Digital Edition.

<sup>16</sup> Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales of Numenor and Middle-earth*, 309.

Gandalf does not emphasize Bilbo's pity at the conclusion of *The Hobbit*, but he discusses that at length with Frodo at the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings*. Within the text of *The Hobbit* during the episode with Gollum under the Misty Mountains, little is said about Bilbo's pity. He begins to justify why it would be acceptable to kill Gollum, but ultimately "a sudden understanding, a pity mixed with horror, welled up in Bilbo's heart: a glimpse of endless unmarked days without light or hope of betterment, hard stone, cold fish, sneaking and whispering."<sup>17</sup> Despite Gollum's murderous intent, Bilbo could not bring himself to strike an unarmed opponent; he shows mercy. However, in *The Hobbit* itself, there is very little philosophical examination of this decision. When discussing the events with Frodo later, Gandalf explains, "It was Pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need. And he has been well rewarded, Frodo. Be sure that he took so little hurt from the evil, and escaped in the end, because he began his ownership of the Ring so."<sup>18</sup> Had someone crueler discovered the Ring and the same scenario played out, Gollum may have been slain. Not only would this have interfered with

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<sup>17</sup> Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 87.

<sup>18</sup> Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 59.

the conclusion of *The Lord of the Rings*, but Bilbo would have become more like Gollum, a soul corrupted by the murderous acquisition of the Ring.

Gandalf does not conclude his remarks there, however. He prophesies that Bilbo's pity will also have some future effect, even if the exact details are uncertain. "I have not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it. And he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many -- yours not least."<sup>19</sup> Gandalf has been especially sensitive to and developed his sense of pity from his youth. If anyone were in a position to understand the power of pity and its connection to the "endurance of hope" as taught by Nienna, it would be Gandalf.<sup>20</sup>

Tolkien scholarship has long affirmed Gandalf's fulfillment of the Prophetic archetype. Gandalf has been identified as a partial Christ figure by many Tolkien scholars. Many seem to agree that, just as Jesus Christ held the three offices of the Priest, Prophet, and King, Tolkien used three characters, Frodo, Gandalf, and Aragorn, respectively, to

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<sup>19</sup> Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 59.

<sup>20</sup> Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 16.

represent each of these three roles. Of Gandalf as Prophet, Birzer writes, "Like a true prophet, Gandalf, the servant of the Flame Imperishable, inspires men to use their gifts for the greater good of society, to live up to the best of the past, and to transmit this tradition to future generations."<sup>21</sup> Donald Williams concurs, "Gandalf is the Prophet. He is an unerring source of not just wisdom but also vision. He is the one who sees what needs to be done and can find people willing to do it. He gives people the faith to look beyond the needs of the moment to the needs of Middle-earth."<sup>22</sup> Peter Kreeft connects these three offices to the main powers of the soul: mind, emotions, and will. He connects Gandalf, the prophet, to the will, which connects directly to Gandalf's purpose to inspire the people of Middle-earth.<sup>23</sup>

When Gandalf is prophesying about Gollum's future role in the fate of the Ring, he has already inspired the White Council to act against Sauron, but he has also inspired an upper-middle-class

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<sup>21</sup> Birzer, *J. R. R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth*, chap. 4.

<sup>22</sup> Donald Williams, *An Encouraging Thought: The Christian Worldview in the Writings of J. R. R. Tolkien* (Cambridge, OH: Christian Publishing House, 2018), chap. 1, Digital Edition.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Kreeft, *The Philosophy of Tolkien* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), Conclusion, Digital Edition.

Hobbit to go on an adventure he does not want to go on. He did not just inspire anyone, though: he inspired Bilbo Baggins, a Hobbit whose disposition would be to show pity on a wretched, almost demonic creature that wants to kill him in a dark cave. All of this has elevated to a point where he can now inspire another Hobbit, encouraging him to pity Gollum.

Frodo's first encounter with Gollum demonstrates the power of Gandalf's inspiration. Sam immediately wants to kill Gollum, believing that he intends to kill them in their sleep. Frodo doubts this, and "It seemed to Frodo then that he heard, quite plainly but far off, voices out of the past: *What a pity Bilbo did not stab the vile creature, when he had a chance! Pity? It was Pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need.*"<sup>24</sup> Reflecting on his recollection of Gandalf's words, Frodo states, "I will not touch the creature. For now that I see him, I do pity him."<sup>25</sup> At this moment, Frodo can kill Gollum. Just as Bilbo displayed pity by refusing to strike an unarmed victim, Frodo shows pity as well. The chief difference between Bilbo and Frodo is that Frodo began at a place of distrust and

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<sup>24</sup> Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 615.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

dislike before being inspired by Gandalf months before to consider pity a viable option. Without that inspiration, this scenario could have played out entirely differently as well.

As the story comes to one of its most intense moments, Frodo decides not to destroy the Ring. He claims the Ring, puts it on, and succumbs to its power. Gollum bites the Ring off his finger before slipping into the fires of Mount Doom, destroying himself and it simultaneously. As Sam helps Frodo escape the mountain, Frodo notes, "But do you remember Gandalf's words: *Even Gollum may have something yet to do?* But for him, Sam, I could not have destroyed the Ring. The Quest would have been in vain, even at the bitter end. So let us forgive him! For the Quest is achieved, and now all is over."<sup>26</sup> In a letter to Amy Ronald, Tolkien commented on Frodo's failure by writing, "In this case the cause (not the 'hero') was triumphant, because by the exercise of pity, mercy, and forgiveness of injury, a situation was produced in which all was redressed and disaster averted. Gandalf certainly foresaw this."<sup>27</sup> Gandalf foresaw this event, so he stepped into his

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<sup>26</sup> Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 947.

<sup>27</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, eds. Christopher Tolkien and Humphrey Carpenter (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), Letter 192, Digital Edition.

role as mentor to prepare Frodo for this moment. As Birzer recognizes, "Though Frodo failed in the end, overcome as he was by desire and greed, he succeeded at a much greater task: living out the advice of Gandalf and performing Christ-like acts of mercy to Gollum."<sup>28</sup> He served as more than just a prophet who foresaw the future; he served as a mentor who anticipated the future and prepared Frodo for his fate.

Although Gandalf's ordained mission was complete, as he told Aragorn when Sauron was defeated, the impact of his training can be seen even after the main quest has been completed. As the Hobbits return to a bleak and despairing Shire, Gandalf warns them that challenges are ahead. Merry optimistically points out that Gandalf is with them, so their mission might be somewhat easier. Gandalf responds, "I am not coming to the Shire. You must settle its affairs yourselves; that is what you have been trained for. Do you not yet understand? My time is over: it is no longer my task to set things to rights, nor to help folk to do so. And as for you, my dear friends, you will need no help. You are grown up now. Grown indeed very high; among the great you are, and I have no longer any fear at all for any

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<sup>28</sup> Birzer, J. R. R. *Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth*, chap. 3.

of you."<sup>29</sup> Much like Bilbo, the four Hobbits have matured through the journey they have undertaken.

Gandalf even goes as far as to say that they have been trained to defend their homeland. If they had not gone on this adventure, they most likely would have fallen, just like many of their kinsmen, but because of the experience and instruction they have received, they are prepared to do what must be done on their own. As Caldecott writes, "The success of the hobbits in dealing with this final peril would not have been possible — would certainly not have been believable — if they had not experienced the epic adventure as a whole, and if we had not seen them transformed into heroes of song and legend; so that when they are plunged back into the banality of the Shire they are able to defeat the evil that they find with the grace — the gifts — that they have received in their travels."<sup>30</sup> Training typically implies a degree of intentionality, however. A trainer provides the instruction to the trainee. In this case, the quest functions as the trainer, and Gandalf provides the intentionality, as he was the one who put all four Hobbits on this mission. He presents the mission to Frodo at the beginning, even before Frodo

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<sup>29</sup> Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 996.

<sup>30</sup> Caldecott, *The Power of the Ring*, chap. 3.

embraces it himself in Rivendell.<sup>31</sup> He pulls an eavesdropping Sam into the quest by his ear.<sup>32</sup> He advocates before Elrond to include Merry and Pippin in the Fellowship.<sup>33</sup> Gandalf's impact as the prophetic mentor extends beyond his active role in the plot. Because of the actions he took, they changed not only the present but also the future. He advocated for including the Hobbits on the quest, and as a result of that advocacy, they were able to defeat Saruman and free their homeland.

Gandalf's designated mission was to defeat Sauron. He performed many great feats of heroism on the battlefield and provided sage advice to the free people of Middle-earth. It may be easy to look towards these monumental tasks and conclude that these were the chief way in which Gandalf defeated Sauron. However, Sauron was not defeated in one moment. Sauron was defeated by serious conversations and momentary decisions of pity, inspired by Gandalf, the prophetic mentor.

*This essay is dedicated to Holly Ordway, a prophetic mentor for many of us here at An Unexpected Journal.*

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<sup>31</sup> Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 61.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

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