



Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 13
Issue 1 April 2009

Article 6

7-4-2016

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Recommended Citation

McDowell, John C. (2016) "Star Wars' Saving Return," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol13/iss1/6>

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Star Wars' Saving Return

Abstract

The relationship of the trilogy of *Star Wars* (SW) prequels to the 'classic trilogy' is a complex one. On the one hand it intensifies themes of fall and redemption, and on the other reinterprets the very nature of the drama as integrally about a parallelism – 'the tragedy of Anakin Skywalker' and 'the adventures of Luke Skywalker'. This figural parallel moves off in a different direction, with Anakin becoming the fallen one and Luke the redeeming one, significantly echoing St. Paul's Adam-Christ typology. This reading possesses significant critical potential for numerous other readings of the SW saga.

The Return of a New Hope for Reading *Star Wars*

In the 1970s traditional religion was out of fashion and the family structure was disintegrating. There was no moral anchor. Lucas remembered how protected he had felt growing up in the cocoonlike culture of the 1950s, a feeling he wanted to communicate in *Star Wars*.¹

The writer and director himself declared that he felt that he had wanted to use the *SW* films to teach morality during a time of increasing despair and introspection after Vietnam. Of course, such a self-positioning most readily invites critical attention on the matter and form of Lucas' self-proclaimed 'teaching' [cf. Jas. 3:1f.]. However, a comment made by Lucas concerning his offering simpleminded solutions to complex problems does not bode well for applauding the pedagogic worth of his cinematic product.² After all, the complexity of problems, by the very nature of their complex density, defy simpleminded solutions. And anything less endangers the usefulness of the proposed solution since distorted patterns of belief generate distorted practices, and the latter assume or shape the former. In fact, the morally nostalgic mood of 1977's *A New Hope* (*ANH*) in particular, according to many, has ignored the 'lessons' of Vietnam and the proper suspicion concerning the political potential for hero-myths within a 'righteous us vs. evil them' type ethos its legacy encouraged. *ANH*'s depiction of good and evil is too clear cut and externalised, and its simplistic moral innocence

rides roughshod over proper self-reflection and reasoned scepticism.³ Such characteristics made it useful to President Ronald Reagan whose (in)famous 'Evil Empire' speech (March 8, 1983) proclaimed in an unself-critical rhetoric that taking the right side in this conflict against Soviet Communism was nothing less than the holy Christian duty of the American people.⁴ Peter Lev is right to admit that while "Lucas is not responsible for the uses politicians and governments make of his film... the ease with which his ideas were put to political and military ends shows something about the Manichaeian quality of the story."⁵

Of course, despite the propensity of certain critics to continue reading the movies in this dualistic vein, 1980's *Empire Strikes Back (ESB)* comes to problematise just such a mood. Crucially, for instance, in the training of Luke Skywalker in Jedi wisdom there appears a considerably more complex dialectical interplay between the exteriorisation of evil (so dominant in *ANH*) and the interiorisation of evil. And yet, even given the powerfully simplistic aesthetic of good-evil's characterisation in *ANH*, dualistic readings of the earlier Episode in the saga should already have been somewhat chastened by the double material thematics of a self-serving Han Solo and a Darth Vader (all-too) briefly revealed by Obi-Wan to have been "a young Jedi... who was a pupil of mine before he turned to evil. ...Vader was seduced by the dark-side of the Force." Already with *ANH*'s

back-story of Vader there is a highly significant inverted metanoia. It is this that the prequels develop.

The relationship of the trilogy of prequels to the 'classic trilogy', however, is itself a complex one. Numerous critics bemoan its political turn – a complaint that oddly implies the 'classic trilogy' to be apolitical – and thus perceive the relation to be one of essential difference. However, I will assume less radically that the lines of continuity enables the later trilogy tends to do two things (both tend to overlap in any case).⁶

Firstly, it intensifies the themes developed in three predecessors, and this is certainly true of the complex dialectic of interior-exterior with regard to the presence of evil which now comes to be depicted in tragic terms. Secondly, it also casts something of a reinterpetive shadow over them. So, for instance, while Episodes IV-VI focused on 'the adventures of Luke Skywalker', Episodes I-III demand that the whole saga be read more in terms of 'the tragedy of Anakin Skywalker'.

Now here is the interesting thing: the prequels, by intensively displaying to view the hints about the turning of Vader to the dark-side of 'the Force', deliberately depict Anakin's story in such a way that it forms a parallel with that of Luke. It is precisely in this parallel that the saga represents its redemptive theme. In *SW*,

redemption comes in two broad forms – social and individual redemption, and the being explored through a vague sense of the immortality of the soul (or at least the Jedi whose soul becomes one with the Force). But both of these types are contextualised in a saving typology of recapitulatory repetition, what medieval theologians would have understood as an *exitus - reditus* scheme. This recapitulatory imagery projects redemption on a grand cosmic scale (i.e., the galactic significance of the two young Skywalker's agencies) that which Joseph Campbell identifies on a more microcosmic scale as the 'hero-myth': this takes the form of a departure "forth from the world of the common day into a region of supernatural wonder", encounter with "fabulous forces" over which "a decisive victory is won", and the return of "the hero ...from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man."⁷

Figurating Recapitulation

In the *SW* movies there is arguably no specifically singular Christ-figure, but rather many who are Christ-like. And this plurality of Christ-figures would entail that the redemptive focus of the saga is placed squarely on human agency (what that does to the theological -ethics suggested by following "the will of the Force" [Qui-Gon, in *The Phantom Menace (TPM)*] is another important question). For instance, Obi-Wan gives his life for the freedom of others; and while his death is mysterious it is certainly not his end since he 'rises' to a new life, and subsequently present with

Luke, always. Even the comment to Luke "Remember Luke, the Force will be with you, always" distinctly echoes Jesus' promise to his disciples [Mtt. 28:20].

Nevertheless, while the saga possesses a certain multiplicity of Christ-forms, it is specifically Luke who comes to look most Christ-like, especially when his characterisation is read in the context of his thematic connection with Anakin, or at least the Anakin of the prequel trilogy. In fact, the 'virgin birth' theme used to depict Anakin's birth-heritage in TPM not only positions him, and consequently his son Luke, within a christic-frame of imagistic reference, but suggests further that the movies are not clearly presenting some kind of humanistic anthropology in which all can easily become 'Christ-figures' through identifying with the typical 'everyman' hero. While they may be 'ordinary' heroes in some sense, they are 'supernaturally' extra-ordinary in another. This image provides a certain messianic location to the characterisation of Anakin, making him something ontologically unique while yet one with other beings and in so doing makes his fate grandly significant for the fate of the entire galaxy. This fits in well with Carl Jung's claim that the hero (and here, the villainous antihero) is a "greater man ... semi-divine by nature".⁸ Campbell's influence seems to be paramount for Lucas here, the mythicist arguing that the story of a virgin miraculously bearing a child is a key part of the heroic monomyth. Nevertheless, whatever its more general provenance, there are conspicuous messianic echoes in the rhetoric used by Qui-Gon of Anakin as "the

Chosen One" whose coming to "bring balance to the Force" had been "prophesied" long before.⁹

But, given 'the tragedy of Anakin Skywalker' (*Attack of the Clones* [AOTC] and *Revenge of the Sith* [ROTS]), he himself becomes ultimately more of an inversion of the Christ-form. Does this perceiving Vader in the light of the Christ mean that he is a failed Christ, "the chosen one" who could not live up to the greatness of his billing? Or is Anakin instead the fallen Adamic figure of Gen 3 who thereby renders Luke the Christically-redemptive one? Certainly, given events in *ESB* and *Return of the Jedi* (ROTJ), it is vital that Luke's redemptive role be acknowledged. Lucas comments:

Well, it does seem strange that Yoda and Obi-Wan would expect the young and naive Luke to defeat the Sith when Yoda and Obi-Wan failed to stop the Sith during *Revenge of the Sith* ... [unless] Yoda believes that Luke may be the chosen one who will destroy the Sith.¹⁰

According to Pollock, "Lucas ... wanted his version of the Christ story in *Empire*. Luke beheads Vader in an underground cave, only to find his own head inside Vader's black helmet – it is the equivalent of Jesus' temptation in the desert."¹¹ So while Lucas himself distances himself from a specifically Christian version of this by placing the temptation theme in a more general context,¹² the Gospel echoes are perhaps closer than such a general claim of influence might suggest, especially in the temptation of political power toward the close of *ESB* [cf. Mtt. 4:8ff.].

It is the nature of the way *SW* presents the redemptive relation of Luke to Anakin that is most theologically interesting. As mentioned earlier, it develops quite deliberately and elaborately a parallelism between Anakin and Luke that vibrates with the feel of the Pauline Adam/Christ typology [Rom. 5:12- 21; 1 Cor. 15:21-22, 45].¹³ So in 'The Beginning: The Making of Episode I' Lucas specifically notifies his design staff:

Anakin [is] kind of duplicating ... [of] the Luke Skywalker role, but you see the echo of where it's all gonna go. Instead of destroying the Death Star he destroys the ship that controls the robots [viz., the Trade Federation battle droids]. Again it's like poetry, they rhyme. Every stanza rhymes with the last one.¹⁴

The parallels are many, and among them are the following:¹⁵ both Anakin and Luke spend their earliest years on Tatooine; both were extremely skillful pilots; there is the parallel between their successes in the Battle of Naboo (*TPM*) and the Battle of Yavin (*ANH*) – although Anakin's victory is portrayed as significantly less deliberate, conscious, and even less galactically significant than Luke's; both were proficient mechanics and owned both the protocol and astromech droids C3PO and R2D2; both became Obi-Wan's Jedi-students; both dream of excitement and adventure; both are whinny, petulant and impatient as young men; both become proficient speeder pilots (*AOTC* and *ESB* respectively); both lose their right hands in lightsaber combat (*AOTC* and *ESB* respectively); both are involved in Satanic-like temptation scenes by the same tempter, Palpatine/Sidious, and have to face the

same temptations – to kill their respective Sith opponent (Dooku [*ROTS*] and Vader [*ROTJ*]) and join with Palpatine (on a second and fateful occasion, Anakin is further ordered to kill Jedi Master Mace Windu).¹⁶

But here is where the parallels significantly cease and a series of reversals take place. Consequently it is Luke (and his twin sister, Leia, according to Yoda) who becomes the "New Hope." Thus, most crucially, while Anakin succumbs to the temptation and falls Luke resists and suffers under Sidious (Vader's messianic role later doubles back in a return that sees him become Luke's saviour); despite Anakin's 'accidental' victory at the Battle of Naboo, evil nonetheless wins the day despite, or rather through, Anakin's triumph, whereas the Empire takes a powerful knock with Luke's action in the Battle of Yavin; Anakin's involvement in this event begins the spiral of tragedy, ultimately culminating in the formation of the first Galactic Empire and the destruction of the Jedi Order, while Luke's inaugurates a 'new hope' and eventually the new Jedi Order.

It is in this recapitulatory form of the parallelism that redemption can be tasted in the movie. The conscious typology and repetition developed takes a certain direction in relation to the 'fall' of Anakin. Anakin, the father is the Adamic-figure (father of God's chosen 'race') one who is faithless to his destiny or calling, never fulfilling his glorious potential (for Adam, this is being in the *imago dei*, Gen. 1:26). Luke is a type of Vader in his repetition of Vader, but a repetition that is

recapitulatingly non-identical, and therefore ultimately redemptive. Thus in this way he becomes the Christic one who is faithful to his destiny or calling, and consequently fulfils his glorious potential as the new hope (or *imago dei* [cf. Col. 1:15]).¹⁷ If Anakin is the divinely chosen one, the fruit of the birthing by 'the Force' (the 'son of God' in a sense), then Luke represents the redemptive second coming of the son who overcomes his temptations to act for 'the Good' as the obedient servant of 'the Force' for the cosmic good of the galaxy, giving himself up even unto possible death at the hands of the Satan-like figure of Sidious, and in self-effacingly inaugurating the return of the Jedi Order. And while Padmé Amidala Naberrie, Anakin's wife (and to an extent even Shmi Skywalker, Anakin's mother), was involved in complex ways with Anakin's fall, it is through the 'good' woman Padmé (and to a lesser degree even Leia Organa) that salvation can come through Luke. Thus if through Adamic-figure came disorder and death, through the Christic one comes new order and life.¹⁸

Conclusion

The implications of this reading are pronounced, and in closing it is worth observing five. Firstly, an Adam-Christ, *exitus - reditus*, or fall-redemption framework for the saga finally undermines the legitimacy of a dualistic reading of good and evil. It would be as absurd to argue for this as it would be to accuse the later Augustine of Manichaeism. Secondly, following on from this, the Adam-

Christ theological schematic negates lazily optimistic anthropologies – the catastrophic waste involved (for the youth himself, the Jedi Order and the Galaxy) in the 'tragedy of Anakin Skywalker' subverts easy talk of the operative goodness of all people. This is accentuated by recalling the 'cosmic significance' of the agencies of these two – in other words, the fact that the fate of the galaxy largely is determined by who they are and what they do. Their characterisation, therefore, is not additional to the galaxy's trajectory, but a kind of representative summation of it. Thirdly, while the imagery and thematics of the saga are perceptibly eclectic, with there being significant Eastern religious overtones, the central driving force is Christological. A reading of the saga such as Albert Mohler's is therefore distinctly dubious.¹⁹ Fourthly, redemption is conceived not in some world- or body-denying fashion, but as in this cosmic reality for its transformation. Noticeably, even if there is a sense of the non-physical existence of the Jedi who have become one with 'the Force', they do nonetheless possess their own type of bodily integrity (*ROTJ*). Finally, the prequels are not radically different in kind from the 'classic trilogy' but are, instead, profoundly in continuity with them as their inverted echo (fall and tragedy rather than grace and redemption).

ABBREVIATIONS	
<i>SW</i>	<i>Star Wars</i>
<i>ANH</i>	<i>A New Hope (1977)</i>

<i>ESB</i>	<i>Empire Strikes Back (1980)</i>
<i>ROTJ</i>	<i>Return of the Jedi (1983)</i>
<i>TPM</i>	<i>The Phantom Menace (1999)</i>
<i>AOTC</i>	<i>Attack of the Clones (2002)</i>
<i>ROTS</i>	<i>Revenge of the Sith (2005)</i>

¹ Dale Pollock, *Skywalking: The Life and Films of George Lucas, the Creator of Star Wars* (Hollywood, New York, London, Toronto: Samuel French, 1990), 143.

² See Pollock, 269.

³ See Orson Scott Card, "'Star Wars' Our Public Religion," *USA Today* (17 March 1997), 13A.

⁴ See, Robert G. Collins, 'Star Wars: The Pastiche of Myth and the Yearning for a Past Future', *Journal of Popular Culture* 11.1 (1977), 6; and Richard Grenier, 'Celebrating Defeat', *Commentary* 70.2 (1980), 58.

⁵ Peter Lev, 'Whose Future? *Star Wars*, *Alien*, and *Blade Runner*,' *Literature/Film Quarterly* 26.1 (1998), 30-37 (31f.). For broadly dualistic readings see Mark Rowlands, *The Philosopher at the End of the Universe* (London : Ebury Press, 2003); Dick Staub, *Christian Wisdom of the Jedi* (San Francisco : Jossey-Bass, 2005). Cf. Hannah Pok, 'The *Star Wars* Trilogy: Fantasy, Narcissism and Fear of the Other in Reagan's America,' <http://hannahpok.com/deepfieldspace/framesrc2c.html>, consulted 18-05-05; Terry Christensen, *Reel Movies: American Political Movies From The Birth of a Nation to Platoon* (New York and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

⁶ Ian Nathan's anticipation of *ROTS* complaining that the "Three prequels have added nothing to the original, bar hype and overkill" is thus carelessly misplaced [Ian Nathan, 'R2D2, Where Are You?,' *The Times Review* (14 May 2005), 14].

⁷ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1949), 30.

⁸ Carl Gustav Jung, 'On the Nature of Dreams,' *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung: The structure and dynamics of the psyche*, vol.8, ed. Herbert Read et al. (London : Routledge & K. Paul, 1960), 293.

⁹ Thomas Horn problematically understands this as a new age messianism, one produced by the belief that God is animistic or pantheistic and that humans are divine members of the whole that God is [Thomas Horn, 'Lucas' *Star Wars* Depicts New Age Messiah,' <http://www.mt.net/~watcher/starwarsmessiah.html>, consulted 26-05-05].

¹⁰ George Lucas, interview on www.supershadow.com (14 May 2005).

¹¹ Pollock, 211.

¹² "Buddha was tempted in the same way. It's all through mythology. The gods are constantly tempting." [Lucas, interview with Bill Moyers, cited in Michael J. Hanson and Max S. Kay, *Star Wars: The New Myth* (Xlibris, 2001), 213].

¹³ This theme plays a highly important role in the soteriology of Irenaeus, C2nd bishop of Lyons, and much of the thinking of the Church [see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, <http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-01/> consulted 01-01-05].

¹⁴ George Lucas, 'The Beginning: The Making of Episode I,' *TPM DVD 2* (1999).

¹⁵ Several of these, and a few more, can be found in Alice Alfonsi, *Star Wars: The Skywalker Family Album* (London : Scholastic, 2002).

¹⁶ Notice that even the movies in which these parallels take place are equivalently placed in their particular series of trilogy.

¹⁷ Mark Rowlands badly fails to understand this meaningful typology when complaining about the fact that Padmé is an echo of the character of Leia [213].

¹⁸ There is a notable eschatological feel about the end of the action in *ROTJ*. See Christopher M. Brown, "'A Wretched Hive of Scum and Villainy': Star Wars and the Problem of Evil," in Kevin S. Decker and Jason T. Eberl (eds.), *Star Wars and Philosophy: More Powerful Than You Can Possibly Imagine* (Chicago and LaSalle, Ill. : Open Court, 2005), 69-79 (78); Roy M. Anker, *Catching Light: Looking for God at the Movies* (Grand Rapids, Mich. : William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 238.

¹⁹ "In the years since 1977 Americans have become primary consumers of Eastern philosophies and ancient mythologies-dumbed down for popular consumption and dressed up for a media age. ... Conspicuously absent from Mr. Lucas's cosmology is anything connected to biblical Christianity." [R. Albert Mohler, 'Faith Vs. the Force', *World Magazine* 21.1 (Dec 31, 2005), <http://www.worldmag.com/mohler/mohler.cfm?id=5923>, consulted 26-05-05].