

Pope Francis, J.R.R. Tolkien and the Lord's Prayer

COMMENTARY

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On Dec. 6, 2017, Pope Francis, in the midst of a video segment explicating the Lord's Prayer on Italian television, voiced a criticism of the English translation of the phrase "lead us not into temptation" that created a brief media stir.

The Holy Father was simply voicing a long-standing concern about the unintentional implication in the phrase that God could actively will our sin. "I am the one who falls," Pope Francis said. "It's not [God] who pushes me toward temptation to see how I fall. A father doesn't do this; a father helps us to get up right away."

When I heard the Pope's words, I knew that the linguistic discussion sounded familiar, but I couldn't remember it from any Bible study or Scripture class. Then I realized: I had heard it from J.R.R. Tolkien, the devout Catholic, author and creator of the Middle-earth "legendarium."

It was not, of course, in his most popular work, *The Lord of the Rings* (though he told one of that novel's earliest readers in 1956 that "lead us not into temptation" was the key to the climactic scene in the novel). It was in an unpublished study of what Tolkien called "the history of the 'Our Father' in English," now in the Tolkien Archive in the Modern Papers collections in the Bodleian Library, in Oxford, England.

In a passage Tolkien wrote more than 80 years ago, he observed that the word rendered in modern English as "temptation" was already problematic in the Latin translation of the *Pater Noster* from Greek. "*Tentatio*," Tolkien wrote, "(or the unrelated *temptatio* that was confused with it) was a good translation of [*peirasmos*] 'a test or trial (of strength or worth)' and was already beginning c. A.D. 1200 in English in scriptural and theological contexts."

The confusion, Tolkien argued, "has surely made 'lead us not into temptation' unintelligible (of God), though in any case this petition remains difficult. *Lead* is also no longer the right word — since it now suggests the action of a leader or guide, often the sinister action of a deceiver." But though Tolkien's unambiguous identification of the phrase as "unintelligible" when applied to God echoes Pope Francis, the flavor of Tolkien's other writings on language and translation — his lifetime occupation both as a fantasist and a professor — make the question far from certain that Tolkien would favor a change in the official translation.

As sensitive as Tolkien was to mistranslation, he was also aware of the weight of tradition, particularly in liturgical language.

Tolkien's knowledge of and interest in the Our Father no doubt began when he learned the prayer as a child — and he learned it as an Anglican. His mother, brother and he did not convert to Catholicism until 1900, when young John Ronald was 8. In fact, his attention would have been forced on the prayer's language immediately upon his mother's conversion, as he and his brother Hilary would have begun then to recite it without the "doxology" ("for thine is the kingdom, etc.") they had pronounced when they first learned the prayer. (This, too, receives commentary in Tolkien's history of the prayer.)

The earliest English versions of the *Fæder ure*, as it was spelled in Old English, were likely known to Tolkien by the time he made Old English language and literature his special study as an Oxford undergraduate, and he continued to use various versions of the prayer as a teaching tool when he taught the language at the University of Leeds (1920-1925) and later at Oxford University (1925-1959).

I say "English versions," plural, because the first feature of the Old English version that struck Tolkien as a Catholic and a historian of language was that, in contrast to later periods of the language (and the Church), there did not seem to be one standard or official translation in Old English times. It was this observation that initiated Tolkien's history of the English Our Father.

In the early spring of 1936 — a year before the publication of *The Hobbit* — Dom Adrian Morey of Downside Abbey in Bath sent Tolkien a photostat of an Old English manuscript he had found in the British Museum and asked for Tolkien's commentary.

The resulting essay occupied at least the next 30 years of Tolkien's life. The text in the Bodleian consists of a large volume of notes made in blue fountain pen in 1936, transferred to typescript sometime in the 1940s, and covered in red ballpoint emendations dating from 1966. When Tolkien died in September 1973, the study remained incomplete, along with several of his other writings. One item in the collection that was completed, however, reveals Tolkien's world-class expertise in another creative form: calligraphy. Apparently Tolkien's first impulse on seeing the facsimile of the manuscript was to make one of his own, in a beautiful imitation of 10th-century Anglo-Saxon manuscript hand. It is, in fact, superior to the original, and worthy of framing.

Whatever the Church decides regarding the English translation of the Our Father, Tolkien's assertion that the phrase "lead us not into temptation" plays a key role in the plot of *The Lord of the Rings* is as "unintelligible" as the prayer if we take "temptation" in the sense of diabolical trickery. But it makes eminent sense if we take it in the sense of "trial, ordeal." Just as God has no wish to entice us toward our fall, the forces of good in the novel — primarily Gandalf, who is an "angel" of the creator — do not wish Frodo to be drawn to the ring.

But all of the good people of Tolkien's Middle-earth hope that Frodo will voluntarily submit to the ordeal, the suffering required to destroy the ring.

Like Christ, Frodo did express the equivalent of “let me not fall into the trial.”

But also like Christ, Frodo knew there would be no salvation for his world if he did not submit that *tentatio*.

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