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An academic Star Wars fan journal

The Saga Journal is a monthly on-line academic review dedicated to the in-depth study of the *Star Wars* saga as presented in George Lucas's six-film series. Our goal is to deliver one of the best collections of scholarly essays on the subject that the internet has to offer.

Here at the Saga Journal, we believe *Star Wars* is more than just an enjoyable space opera set in a galaxy far, far away. We recognize it as a modern myth, a cultural phenomenon all its own. We want to encourage the literary exploration of all aspects of the story as presented in the Prequel and Original Trilogy films.

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The Return of a Jedi: Christian Themes in Anakin Skywalker's Redemption

by ami-padme

The redemption of Anakin Skywalker in *Return of the Jedi* is the seminal event of the *Star Wars* saga, and the culmination of his complex and powerful character arc. By turning against his Emperor and Master, by saving his son and rejecting the Dark Side, Anakin completed his journey back to the Light after a 20-year detour through the heart of darkness.

Wrong-doing, redemption, forgiveness, and salvation are matters of great import to many of the world's religions, including Christianity. While George Lucas has stated that he did not base *Star Wars* on any one religion, his desire to spark thinking about spirituality in his audience allowed his movies to relate to multiple religious and mythological traditions.¹ Anakin's final redemption can serve as an example of how the saga connects to the teachings of mainstream Christianity.

It may be helpful to take a brief look at some of the terms involved in a discussion of redemption and related issues. "Sin" is defined as "a transgression of religious or moral law," as disobedience to God's will and the separation from God that results from it, and more simply as "something regarded as being shameful, deplorable, or...wrong."² There is no reference directly to sin in *Star Wars*, however, the "Dark Side" is a concept that seems to encompass not only evil-doing, but also the committing of actions that run contrary to "the will of the Force" (the Force being the equivalent of an ultimate spiritual power). The definition of "forgiveness" is "the act of excusing a mistake or offense."³ It is something – a gift – given to sinners by other people and by God. Again, the specific term "forgiveness" is never explicitly mentioned in the saga, but the idea of it is repeatedly shown. The central term, "redemption," and the related word "redeem" have two pertinent meanings: first, in Christianity, to redeem one's self is "to save [one's self] from a state of sinfulness and its consequences" – a definition not specific to religion says that to redeem is "to restore...honor, worth, or reputation."⁴ These meanings can easily apply to Anakin in *Return of the Jedi*, as well as to Luke's determination to help save his father in that film. Finally, a concept related to redemption is that of "salvation," which in Christianity is closely tied to the eternal life and triumph over death and damnation that Christians who are redeemed or "saved" are promised.⁵ There is an afterlife in *Star Wars* that is considered the "path to immortality"; it is available to Anakin and other "good" Jedi, though it has not been clearly defined in films (in terms of exactly who can attain it, among other questions).

Looking at Anakin in Episode VI with a Christian perspective, one idea to consider is that even the worst sins are forgivable, and the worst sinners are eligible for redemption and salvation. In the New Testament of the Bible, only one sin is specifically mentioned by Christ as being unforgivable – blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.⁶ This sin, which is sometimes defined as, among other things, "determined unbelief,"⁷ has no real equivalent in *Star Wars*, but it is worth noting that Darth Vader never stopped believing the Force, and never spoke against it; in fact, he did the opposite, chastising and punishing Imperial officers who were derisive of his beliefs, and making clear he remained an adherent of his "religion" even in the face of the power of something like the Death Star. However much this sin can be connected to the *Star Wars* galaxy, Anakin would not appear to be guilty of it.

No other sin is called unforgivable – in fact, it is pointed out that terrible sins are and should be pardoned – and this includes some examples of particularly terrible wrongs. For instance, harming children is mentioned more than once in the Gospels as a heinous crime befitting a severe punishment. And of course, Anakin, as Darth Vader, murders children as part of the Jedi Order purge and the Tusken

slaughter, crimes that some audience members no doubt believe makes him irredeemable. In Mark 9:42, Jesus states that it would be better for a man “that a millstone were hanged about his neck” than he offend a “little one.”⁸ Still, it is never stated that a person who commits such acts cannot be redeemed if he is indeed repentant. Also, the story of Paul tells of perhaps the worst persecutor of Christians in the early Church in his days as Saul, who, after his conversion on the road to Damascus, became one of the greatest leaders in Church history, largely responsible for the spread of Christianity throughout the world. Darth Vader was “the scourge of the Jedi” and was a crucial participant in the destruction of the Order.⁹ Yet, with his conversion in *Return of the Jedi*, he did what no other Jedi could do – destroy the Sith Order completely and restore balance to the Force, allowing the Order to rise again through his son, Luke. Lastly, Jesus answers the question of who can be saved when he says, “The things which are impossible with men are possible with God.”¹⁰ So, according to Christian tradition, Anakin’s sins, terrible as they are, are not unforgivable, and he is still eligible for redemption and salvation.

[I]t is not the act of destroying Palpatine that gives Anakin redemption – he makes the right choice/converts, and once that has occurred there is nothing else he can do but kill Palpatine and save the day.

A second aspect of redemption to examine is the thought that it cannot be earned. People often struggle with this idea, believing that sinners need to “make up” for their sins, to right their wrongs before they can be forgiven by others (or saved by God). While such acts are an important for a penitent person to undertake – for “faith without works is dead” after all¹¹ – they are the result of a conversion and desire to follow the right path, rather than what actually earns someone forgiveness or redemption. Christianity teaches that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” and that the saved are “justified...by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”¹² As long a sinner is sincere, salvation is a gift bestowed upon the repentant, not a payment owed to him based on a tally of what he has or has not done. Both the 13th chapter of Luke and the third chapter of John state that inner conversion is the key to redemption and everlasting life: “Except ye repent, ye shall all...perish” and “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”¹³ Also, Acts 3:19 says that once a sinner is converted, it is as though his sins have been “blotted out”.¹⁴ When it comes to redemption, what counts is sincere conversion and grace, not tracking various acts.

In *Star Wars*, there is the question of whether Anakin’s “works” are “enough” to make up for the horrible crimes he has committed – even if the act in question was killing Palpatine at the cost of his own life, ending the Sith Order, saving his son, destroying the Empire, and so on. However, this may miss the point; it is not the act of destroying Palpatine that gives Anakin redemption – he makes the right choice/converts, and once that has occurred there is nothing else he can do but kill Palpatine and save the day. In any event, it is most likely his inner change that saves him, as there is little he can do to balance out the crimes he has committed in over 20 years of following the Dark Side.

Following from this point -- if one cannot earn salvation and conversion is what counts, then so-called “death-bed” or last-minute conversions are as valid as any others. This can be another sticking point for some who watch *Star Wars*: after spending half his life serving the Dark Side, Anakin’s redemption comes mere moments before his death. How can five-to-ten minutes spent in the Light measure against the decades spent in Darkness? But in Christianity, just as there is no tally of good and bad deeds that are added up to determine salvation, there is no clock running on the time spent doing good or doing evil. The Bible recounts the tale of a thief condemned to die for his crimes, who showed true faith shortly before his death as he hung on his cross next to Jesus. Jesus responded to him saying, “Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.”¹⁵ The parable of the Prodigal Son tells of a man welcomed home by

his father with open arms, despite years of sinful and wasteful living; he was as welcomed and loved as the “good” son who had acted right and stayed with his father throughout the same time period.¹⁶ Clearly, the time consideration does not preclude Anakin from redemption.

Another matter to consider is the role that other people play in forgiving sinners and helping them toward salvation. Anakin’s “helper” is obviously his son (though at least one other person also believed in his potential for good – his wife Padmé). Luke provides a positive example of someone who “hates the sin but loves the sinner” in his dealings with his father. The phrase, often attributed to Saint Augustine, points to moral clarity about right and wrong, while offering forgiveness to people God loves and who may still be redeemed.¹⁷ Luke has no question about his father’s actions and knows he himself cannot join the Emperor or fall to the Dark Side. His clarity – even in the face of death at Palpatine’s hands – serves as an example to Darth Vader. Yet Luke also approaches Vader with compassion and a determination to save him, and neither fight with him or kill him. He does this despite disagreement from Yoda and Obi-Wan, despite deep concern from Leia, despite the plans of the Emperor to use his caring for his father against him, and despite his father’s own initial resistance. In the Gospel, Jesus exhorts Christians to love their enemies, however difficult that can sometimes be, and cautions them on judging others against standards that they themselves may not be able to meet. He further states that he was sent to Earth for the sinners, and he was often criticized for speaking and communing with known wrong-doers.¹⁸ He said that people should repeatedly forgive those who have wronged them, and famously said those without sin could cast the first stone against another. Luke’s actions in *Return of the Jedi* show him to be a model of forgiveness and compassion, and he is the fundamental factor in his father’s redemption.

A final related matter is the issue of salvation and eternal life. Everlasting life and escape from damnation are promised to those who believe in Christ (the well-known verse John 3:16 states this plainly).¹⁹ Anakin experiences an post-redemption afterlife, through a path referred to as “immortality” by Yoda in *Revenge of the Sith*. The Episode III novel suggests that only the selfless can achieve this state of being.²⁰ The fact that Anakin finds this afterlife is moving proof of his final salvation. Also of note is the fact that Anakin had searched in vain for immortality (for others he cared about) at least since his mother’s death in *Attack of the Clones*, and had done many terrible things in pursuit of that power. In the end, he was unable to save those he loved, and his own life was ruined in the process. It is not until he is willing to sacrifice his own life, to let go and do what was right, that he finds the power to both rescue his son and defeat death. In Matthew 10:39 Jesus says, “He that findeth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.”²¹ That seems to apply somewhat to Anakin in the end.

In conclusion, there are many parallels to be drawn between the redemption of Anakin Skywalker in *Return of the Jedi* and Christian teachings on sin, forgiveness, redemption, and salvation. These connections add to the rich storytelling George Lucas has created in his epic saga.

Notes and Works Cited

¹ Moyers, Bill and Lucas, George. “Of Myth and Men.” *Time*. April 26, 1999: Vol. 153, No. 16.

² *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language* (Fourth Edition). (2000) Houghton Mifflin Company.

³ *WordNet*® 2.0. (2003) Princeton University Press.

⁴ *The American Heritage*® *Dictionary of the English Language*

⁵ Robert W. Yarbrough. *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Walter A. Elwell, ed. 1996. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.

⁶ Matthew 12:31-32, *The Holy Bible*, Authorized King James Version. Iowa Falls: World Bible Publishers, 1989.

⁷ *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*. Charles F. Pfeiffer & Everett F. Harrison, ed. 1962. Chicago: Moody Press. p. 950. There are different interpretations of what “blasphemy of the Holy Spirit” entails. Some theologians believe it refers to the Pharisees of Christ’s day attributing His miraculous works to Satan (in which case, it would be impossible for anyone not alive during Christ’s time to commit the sin). Others argue it refers to those that have actively, knowingly, and repeatedly rejected the Holy Spirit, leaving themselves unable to access the sole road to forgiveness and salvation. However, it is important to note that while the second definition leaves the possibility of a person committing an “unforgivable sin” more open, no man can know what is in the heart or soul of another, and cannot/must not judge another person to be in such a position.

⁸ *The Holy Bible*. See also Matthew 18:1-9 and Luke 17:1-2.

⁹ Darth Vader character databank entry from the official *Star Wars* website, StarWars.com, <starwars.com/databank/character/darthvader/index.html>

¹⁰ Luke 18:26-27, *The Holy Bible*.

¹¹ James 2:20, *The Holy Bible*.

¹² Romans 3:23-24, *The Holy Bible*.

¹³ Luke 13:3 and John 3:3, *The Holy Bible*.

¹⁴ Acts 3:19, *The Holy Bible*.

¹⁵ Luke 23:39-43, *The Holy Bible*.

¹⁶ Luke 15:11-32, *The Holy Bible*. Also, for another parable that relates to “last-second” redemptions, see the story of the workers in the vineyard in Matthew 20:1-15.

¹⁷ “St. Augustine’s Letter 211,” translated in J.-P. Migne (ed.) “*Patrologiae Latinae*” Volume 33, (1845). St. Augustine wrote “Cum dilectione hominum et odio vitiorum,” which translates to, “With love for mankind and hatred of sins,” often repeated as, “Love the sinner but hate the sin.”

¹⁸ Matthew 5:43, 7:1-5, 9:11-13, *The Holy Bible*.

¹⁹ *The Holy Bible*.

²⁰ Stover, Matthew. *Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith*. Ballantine Publishing Group, New York. 2005.

²¹ *The Holy Bible*.

The Names of *Star Wars*

by Sarah

One thing in *Star Wars* that often gets overlooked is the names. Some are ones we recognize (Ben, Luke, Owen), some sound somewhat odd (Padmé, Dooku), some look like somebody hit random letters on a keyboard. Pretty much all of them, however, have some meaning, whether hidden or obvious – and contain clues to that character’s future, before we discovered what their fates truly were going to be.

Let’s start somewhere near the beginning: *A New Hope* introduces us to Luke Skywalker – the name is the first hint that he’s the good guy. “Skywalker” means exactly what it says: one who walks the sky, or someone who’s destined for great things. A fitting name for the central family of the saga – at least two of whom are talented pilots, literal skywalkers. Luke, on the other hand, means “light” or “bringer of light” – very suitable given his role in the story, as the one who brings light back to his father and the galaxy. (And, of course, the name Luke itself began as the name Lucas – no prizes for guessing where that came from.)

Leia’s name, on the other hand, means “weary” not quite as good a fit, but obviously she’s weary of the Empire (and quite possibly of Han).¹ Han Solo also got a relatively simple name: “Solo” literally means “alone” and “Han” means “he.” Put them together and you get “he alone” and Han is introduced as a cynical loner.

Padmé’s name is one rarely found on Earth (although “Padma” exists as a name), but it has a meaning attached to it too. Padmé means lotus, a flower said to cause dreams – appropriate considering that it was Anakin’s dream which predicted her fate, and also that she comes from a planet associated with gardens and therefore flowers. Also, it is a type of flower that dies soon after blooming, fitting with what was seen in *Revenge of the Sith*. Anakin’s name is more difficult; some people say it’s completely made up, others say it comes from Ken Annakin, one of Lucas’s friends.² But as the name has apparently been around since the very first draft of *Star Wars* (when it was spelled “Annikin”), chances are it was completely invented and kept getting re-invented until it ended up in the form we know it as today.

Pretty much all of [the *Star Wars* names], however, have some meaning, whether hidden or obvious – and contain clues to that character’s future, before we discovered what their fates truly were going to be.

The Sith names are mostly somewhat obvious: Maul (mauled), Tyrannus (tyrant), and Plagueis (plague...the beginning of the plague of the Sith?) pretty much speak for themselves, as does the name of henchman/droid General Grievous. Darth Sidious’s name was made by taking the “in” out of “insidious,” just as Darth Vader sounds like it was made by taking the “in” out of “invader.” The fact that the names have a similarity, as opposed to the other Sith names, is fitting considering that out of all the relationships between Sith, theirs is the most important and complicated one – it gives them a connection.

Others have theorized that Darth Vader means “Dark Father” in Dutch (it doesn’t, although it’s fairly close). According to the Expanded Universe, “Darth” is the title the Sith Lords made from Dark Lord of the Sith, but as this is never mentioned in the series it was likely invented to give the name an “in-universe” explanation. “Darth” has

apparently been around since the very first draft of what eventually became *Star Wars*, before the Sith had even been invented; Darth Vader was still called Darth Vader even before he was the character we know.

Another less well-known idea of where the name Vader originally came from: George Lucas went to high school with someone called Gary Vader. Could it be a massive coincidence...?³

Count Dooku, the alter-ego of Darth Tyrannus, most likely got his name from the Japanese word for poison. Christopher Lee confirms it: “Not many people realise that dooku is Japanese for ‘poison’ – which is very appropriate, really, because he’s lethal.”⁴ It’s a good name for a Sith, as the dark side is something that poisons your mind and Dooku was once a Jedi. It’s likely that his title of Count came from Lee’s most famous film role, that of Count Dracula, another famous villain.

Palpatine – the now infamous evil politician/Sith who eventually loses his power like so many before him – may have gotten his name from Palatine Hill, the city where Rome might have been founded (by Romulus, in Roman mythology), and where many Roman emperors built their palaces. Palpatine’s empire resembles a Roman one, a corrupt society which eventually fell, and Palpatine himself has much in common with the arrogant emperors, who rose to power using less than noble means.

Another politician has an intriguing name: Finis Valorum. Finis means finish or end, valor means courage or bravery; with his falling out of power to be replaced by Palpatine, an end to courage (as Palpatine could not be described as particularly brave) does indeed begin.

The first part of Obi-Wan Kenobi’s name comes from the name of the sword belt worn by samurai, the warriors who the Jedi are based on. Plenty of thought appears to have gone into many of the Jedi names: Shaak Ti (a female Jedi glimpsed briefly in *Attack of the Clones*) means energy; Jocasta (the Jedi Archivist) was the mother of Oedipus in mythology – another story about fate. Qui-Gon Jinn’s name is perhaps the cleverest: his first name comes from qi gong, an type of Chinese medicine. “Qigong relies on the traditional Chinese belief that the body has an energy field generated and maintained by the natural respiration of the body, known as Qi.”⁵ Sounds a lot like the Living Force, and is appropriate for someone who meditates in the midst of battle.

“Jinn,” on the other hand, is a type of genie, convenient for the person who grants Anakin’s wish. Genies are creatures neither inherently good or evil, and the discovery of Anakin could be argued as being either a very good thing or a very bad thing, for the Jedi and the galaxy in general. In *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (the book which helped inspire *Star Wars*) the Jinn are described as “dangerous because they threaten the fabric of security into which we have built ourselves and our family. But they are fiendishly fascinating too, for they carry keys that open the whole realm of the desired and feared adventure of the discovery of the self.”⁶ Something pretty close to that happened in *The Phantom Menace*, as Anakin is separated from his mother, his only family – and eventually Anakin does discover his self, although it takes him a little while to do so.

The name of Anakin’s mother is taken from Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth, light and fortune, known as “the mother of the universe” – and Shmi gives birth to the Chosen One. Interestingly, Lakshmi is associated often with the lotus, another parallel to be drawn between Shmi and Padmé, the two women most important to Anakin.

Other names are less rooted in mythology but still are worth thinking about: Mon Calamari get their name from a type of squid (and just happen to look like a squid species); a couple of the Neimodians are named after politicians; and Orn Free Taa was derived from “corn fritter.” And of course, not every name means something or has a story behind it – a great many of them were probably chosen simply because they sounded good. “Owen Lars” sounds like the sort of name that a farmer might have, “Yoda” sounds old and wise, and R2D2 was just a combination of letters and numbers that sounded good (his

name wasn't taken from a film reel of American Graffiti; that's just a myth, it turns out). And Chewbacca and Mace Windu don't appear to have much meaning to them. Also, (an addition of sorts to the third Darth Vader name theory) Boba Fett was apparently also taken from someone George Lucas went to school with, Bob A. Fett. However, that has yet to be confirmed as true, and most likely is just a fandom legend.

A few of the planets have well-chosen names as well: a dagoba (with an extra letter in the film, "Dagobah") is "a Buddhist shrine or mound containing relics of a Buddha or important manuscript."⁷ Suitable for the planet where the last of the Jedi – one of the last few relics of the Force – lives. Geonosis sounds like "genesis," meaning beginning, and that particular planet was where the Clone Wars began. Hoth, on the other hand, sounds like "hot" – the exact opposite of what it is.

The names of *Star Wars* certainly give the story extra depth once they are looked into – up there with the best of other fictional universes where names feature into the equation. (*Harry Potter*, a world populated with people like werewolves called Remus Lupin and Fenrir Grayback, springs to mind.) They deepen the story's mythological roots even further, and give us greater insight into the galaxy far far away and the characters who inhabit it.

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¹ The definitions of Luke and Leia's names from babynames.com

² From the Darth Vader entry on wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Darth_Vader

³ TheForce.net message boards: <http://boards.theforce.net/message.asp?topic=5981698&page=1>

⁴ J.W. Rinzler. *The Making of Revenge of the Sith*. Random House, 2005, page 112.

⁵ An excellent essay on Qui-Gon's name exists here: <http://www.qui-gonline.org/features/naming.htm>

⁶ Joseph Campbell. *Hero with a Thousand Faces (The Hero As Warrior)*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968, page 7.

⁷ Quoted from Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dagoba>

Discovering *Star Wars*

Slychick6

No one else remembers the first *Star Wars* experience I myself remember – four years old at a New Year's party, a giant man in full Darth Vader costume picking me off the ground and me being so scared I cried. You might not think, then, with an experience like that, not only would I end up liking SW, but coming to love Vader more than any fictional character yet.

Since I was born years after the original trilogy ended, SW was always there, my childhood dotted by experiences like the Vader guy, seeing the *A New Hope* trench run on a SW toy commercial and getting excited, then sulking when I realized the movie wasn't actually on. The first turning point came with the Special Editions, seeing ANH at the cheap movie (an experience my sister rues me for to this day). Even with the crappy quality it was still SW in big-screen glory, and it was the coolest thing ever.

The Phantom Menace opening day saw me bobbing in my chair in excitement and loving it from the opening crawl onward. TPM began steering my love of SW as a cool action film toward the story of a boy, knowing what he'd become, that he'd grow up, fall in love, and lose all that – from then on, I've loved Anakin, and have more with each film. (Hayden's played no small part in that, much to my boyfriend's annoyance. ;))

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