

JOHN BOWEN

# Tolkien and Faith

The Spiritual Worldview  
*of The Lord of the Rings*



A DARE BOOKLET

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## What Sort of Tale?

**John Ronald Reuel Tolkien** was a professor of Anglo-Saxon studies and English literature at Oxford from 1925 to 1959. In 1937, Tolkien published a novel called *The Hobbit*, about a little creature, a hobbit by the name of Bilbo Baggins, who finds himself involved in an adventure with dwarves, elves, a wizard, trolls, treasure, and a dragon. Bilbo brings home from his adventure a mysterious Ring which has the power to make its bearer invisible.

Tolkien then began work on *The Lord of the Rings*, a three-part story about the Ring. The Ring becomes the property of Bilbo's nephew, Frodo, who discovers that he is in mortal danger because he possesses it. The only answer is for him to leave his home in the Shire and embark on a quest to destroy the Ring. That quest is the heart of the three parts of *The Lord of the Rings*.

The first part of that story, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, was published in 1954, with the other parts, *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King*, following the next year. Together they constitute more than half a million words. Even before the first movie came out in 2001, more than 100 million copies of the books had been sold.

So what is it that makes this book, by an obscure professor of Anglo-Saxon, about a world inhabited by strange creatures, so popular? There are very few female characters. (Their role is expanded in the movies.) There is no sex. There are long periods in the book when almost nothing seems to happen. There are about 600 different personal names in the stories, and, to confuse things further, some people are called by two or three different names. The books are filled with references to events and places and people that happened long before the book opens, and of which we know nothing.

Why do these stories resonate so deeply for so many people? I believe that the main appeal of *The Lord of the Rings* lies in its spirituality. Not that the spirituality lies exposed on the surface. Few who read *The Lord of the Rings* think of it as a religious or spiritual work. But it is certainly there, in subtle and powerful ways. Tolkien himself certainly saw the book as spiritual: he once described it as "a fundamentally religious and Catholic work."<sup>1</sup>

Yet how can one look at the spirituality of a book that is over 1000 pages long? One way is by examining its worldview.

A worldview is, as the word implies, a way of viewing the world, an outlook on life, an explanation of the world. A worldview is by nature philosophical and spiritual and religious, in the sense that it offers answers to life's big questions. We often use metaphors of seeing, such as That's your point-of-view, or That's how I see things, or Let's take a look at the situation, or Try looking through their eyes, or You have a blind spot about that. Seeing is very important in our world. So our worldview is the big picture of how we see the world. It's whatever big story we happen to believe about the world's nature, and origin, and destiny.

Towards the end of *The Two Towers*, Frodo and Sam, the main characters of *The Lord of the Rings*, are discussing just such a story, and their role in it. They are puzzled about what kind of a story it might be:

*"I wonder what sort of a tale we've fallen into?" [says Sam]*

*"I wonder," said Frodo. "But I don't know. And that's the way of a real tale. Take any one you're fond of. You may know or guess, what kind of a tale it is, happy-ending or sad-ending, but the people in it don't know. And you don't want them to."<sup>2</sup>*

In fact, they find they can make connections with the stories they were told as children, of heroes from long ago. Sam, for example, realizes that the "star-glass" Frodo is carrying contains light from one of the Silmarils, the wonderful jewels created early in the life of Middle Earth, with light from the Blessed Realm.<sup>3</sup>

Thus they come to understand that there is a constantly unfolding story about Middle Earth, and that in some mysterious way they are part of it. As a result, what they know about the heroes who came before them actually encourages them in their own trials. Sam even speculates that one day their

story too may be “read out of a great big book with red and black letters, years and years afterwards.”

Yet Frodo and Sam have to accept that there is not much more they can know about the story they belong to. In Tolkien’s mind, however, Frodo and Sam were part of a much bigger story, a story that describes and explains their world from beginning to end. To put it another way, in *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien expresses a very specific worldview. In fact, it is only when one sees this bigger perspective that the story of the Ring, and of Frodo and Sam, makes full sense. What I want to do in this booklet is to show how the stories we are told in *The Lord of the Rings* fit into this larger story, this worldview. The outline of this bigger narrative is provided by another book of Tolkien’s, *The Silmarillion*.

The framework I will use for thinking about the story in this way is provided by the writing of Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton on the subject of worldviews.<sup>4</sup> They suggest that one way to analyze and compare worldviews is by asking four questions:

**Where are we?** *What kind of a world are we in?*

**Who are we?** *Who are the inhabitants of this world? What do we know about them?*

**What is the problem?** *What is fundamentally wrong with this world?*

**What is the solution?** *How can the problem be put right?*

I find it is often helpful to add a fifth question:

**Where are we going?** *What is the ultimate fate of this world and its inhabitants?*

When we ask these questions of *The Lord of the Rings*, then, what kind of a worldview emerges?

## Where Are We?

If we read *The Lord of the Rings* only, we would simply say that we are in the world of Middle Earth. We know nothing of where it came from, or where it will end, or indeed whether it was created or just happened, nor whether it came into being for a purpose. But, according to *The Silmarillion*, Middle Earth is in fact part of a much bigger world, indeed, a whole cosmos, created by a supreme being whom Tolkien calls Iluvatar. This Iluvatar has created Middle Earth through the agency of spiritual beings, the Ainur, whom we might call angels. Iluvatar gives musical themes to the Ainur, and, as they sing, every theme, every note, every harmony, takes the form of something in the world of Middle Earth.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, if we ask, Where are we? in *The Lord of the Rings*, the answer is that we are in a world made by Iluvatar. Iluvatar is good, and the world Iluvatar makes is good. At the same time, for reasons which are never explained, he allows evil to enter his good world. As a result, the world we meet in the book is still good, but it is now a flawed world. Middle Earth is not basically evil with strange touches of good, nor is it equally divided between good and evil: it is a good place to be, full of beauty and goodness, but frequently coloured by violence, corruption and sadness. We will see more of this in answering the question, What is the problem?

## Who Are We?

The inhabitants of Middle Earth are called the Children of Iluvatar, the creator, but they are of several different races. When the Nine Walkers, the “Fellowship of the Ring,” come

together, they are said to “represent the ... Free Peoples of the world”—that is, elves, dwarves and men.<sup>6</sup> Hobbits, of course, are another race again: we are never told the story of their creation, but we presume they too are creations of Iluvatar.

All these Children of Iluvatar are amazing and beautiful. Even the Ainur, the great angels, who have seen so much of the wonders Iluvatar has made, are impressed and are immediately drawn to love them, not least for what they see in them of the endless creativity of Iluvatar.<sup>7</sup>

So the inhabitants of Middle Earth are good and they are free and they are beautiful, but, as we shall see, they are also capable of great weakness and evil.

## What is the Problem?

On one level, the problem of *The Lord of the Rings* is the Ring itself, and, behind the Ring, Sauron who made it. Sauron lusts for power, and it is the Ring which enables him to consolidate his power over Middle Earth.

But Sauron and the Ring are only the most recent manifestation of a larger and more ancient evil, and the war between the forces of Sauron and the Children of Iluvatar is a pale reflection of a much older conflict which takes place on a cosmic level. Occasionally there are hints of this in *The Lord of the Rings*. Aragorn, for example, refers to “the Great Enemy, of whom Sauron of Mordor was but a servant.”<sup>8</sup> Yet *The Lord of the Rings* never tells us any more of “the Great Enemy” whom Sauron serves. To understand this character we have to return to *The Silmarillion*.

## Rebellion Against Iluvatar

After Iluvatar gives the Ainur melodies and harmonies, we are told that one of the Ainur, Melkor, is dissatisfied with the part he is given, and introduces music of his own devising, music which serves only to draw attention to himself. The rest of the music is almost thrown into confusion, not least because others of the Ainur now adjust their part to harmonize with Melkor’s, rather than with Iluvatar’s.<sup>9</sup>

Then, when Middle Earth comes into being, Melkor comes too. He pretends, even to himself at first, that his motivation is to limit the damage done by his music. Yet in fact he is envious of Elves and Men, and wants to have power over them.<sup>10</sup>

## The Sin of Pride

That is the fundamental flaw in Melkor’s character. It is not just that he *rebels* against Iluvatar: it’s that he wants to *be* Iluvatar. The way Iluvatar has created the world, however, is that it functions best when all the different kinds of being co-operate with Iluvatar and with one another, and each one does what it is created to do and be. Words like harmony and co-operation are not in Melkor’s vocabulary, however. In a word, his problem is pride.

There are actually two different kinds of pride. In fact, French has two words for pride. There is *fier*, the kind of pride that takes pleasure in being who you are. It has to do with dignity and self-awareness and joy. But there is another kind of pride—the French word is *orgueil*—the pride that wants to be *more* than you are, and to do it at the expense of everyone else. This second is the pride of Melkor.

Melkor has disciples, and chief among these is Sauron,

whose one redeeming feature, according to Tolkien, is the ironical one that for a long time he served someone else, even if that someone was Melkor, rather than himself.<sup>11</sup>

### **Divide and Conquer**

One of the chief ways that Melkor and later Sauron get their way is by dividing those who oppose them. The world of *The Lord of the Rings* is a world where goodness draws people together; evil drives them apart. This makes sense, of course. If evil seeks for power for itself, and tries to enslave others by taking away their power, evil is hardly likely to nurture relationships of trust and vulnerability. We see this effect of evil in the way the Orcs, who are Melkor's creation, are always fighting against each other.

Sauron's Ring also brings the divisive power of evil into the midst of those who are normally on the side of good, the Fellowship of the Ring. The first occasion we see this is when Bilbo is leaving the Shire after his birthday party, and is reluctant to leave the Ring behind. As a result, he and Gandalf almost come to blows.<sup>12</sup> Then, much later, after Sam has been carrying the Ring for a time, he tries to give it back to Frodo, and Frodo, like Bilbo before him, becomes angry and possessive about the Ring.<sup>13</sup> Haldir the elf sums up this divisive power of the Ring by saying, "in nothing is the power of the Dark Lord more clearly shown than in the estrangement that divides all those who still oppose him."<sup>14</sup>

### **The Corrupting Power of the Ring**

What is happening in these incidents is that the Ring tends to corrupt those who hold it. Those who are strong simply refuse it because they know the Ring would twist them to become

evil and self-seeking like Sauron. For instance, when Frodo asks Gandalf if he will take Frodo's place as the Ring bearer, Gandalf rejects the suggestion immediately, on the paradoxical grounds that he would have great need of it.<sup>15</sup> The greater the need, presumably, the greater the dependence on the Ring, and ultimately the greater its ability to corrupt. Galadriel responds similarly when Frodo offers her the ring. Sam protests that she would use the Ring for good, and, though that is so, Galadriel knows that the temptation to abuse its power would in the end prove overwhelming, and so she refuses it.<sup>16</sup>

Others, however, are taken in by the appeal of the Ring and are destroyed by it. Boromir, one of the Fellowship, is one of these. He pleads with Frodo to hand it over for the most altruistic of motives: he is a great warrior who could unite all the forces of Middle Earth to overcome Sauron. Yet his own words betray him as he fantasizes how "all men would flock to my banner!"<sup>17</sup> Even as he plans what good he would do with the Ring, his own self-aggrandizement begins to take him over.

Unlike Gandalf and Galadriel, Boromir does not realize, or cannot believe, what harm the Ring would do to him. It takes the battle with the Orcs at the end of the first book to show him how wrong he was—and he pays for his error with his life.

One reason Frodo is qualified to be the Ring-bearer is that he seems to be small and weak enough that such temptations do not touch him. Yet by the time he arrives at the Cracks of Doom, he too finds that his desire to possess the Ring overwhelming, and he is reluctant to destroy it.<sup>18</sup>

Gollum, of course, is the one in whom the destructive power of the Ring is most obvious. He has owned it for years, perhaps centuries, and it has sucked the life out of him. His desire to get the Ring back is not wrapped up in any altruistic language. He knows what the Ring is and what it can do, and

he wants it. He has a naked desire for power, although the way he expresses it demonstrates how pathetic that desire is at bottom:

*"If we has it, then we can escape, even from Him, eh? Perhaps we grows strong, stronger than the Wraiths. Lord Smeagol? Gollum the Great? The Gollum? Eat fish every day, three times a day, fresh from the sea."*<sup>19</sup>

### **Abuse of the Environment**

The power of evil destroys not only community and individuals, however. Its effects spread out like ripples to touch even the environment. As the Fellowship prepares to leave Lothlorien early on their journey, Haldir warns that "The Dimrill Dale is full of vapour and clouds of smoke, and the mountains are troubled. There are noises in the deeps of the earth."<sup>20</sup>

As Frodo and Sam come closer to the Land of Mordor, the destructive power of evil on the environment becomes ever clearer. The Orcs destroy any living thing that gets in their way, whether animal or vegetable.<sup>21</sup> Saruman unscrupulously cuts down trees in order to fuel his evil projects. Around the walls of Isengard, his stronghold, a pleasant valley has been turned into "a wilderness of weeds and thorns."<sup>22</sup> And Mordor itself is the scene of almost total devastation. Slag heaps, ash, mud, filth and refuse litter the landscape as far as the eye can see, "as if the mountains had vomited the filth of their entrails upon the lands about." It is "a land defiled, diseased beyond all healing."<sup>23</sup>

The contrast with the Shire, where all is peaceful and fruitful, and where gardening is a highly respected profession,<sup>24</sup> becomes ever more stark. Yet the difference is understandable. It is the inhabitants of the Shire, who have so little ambition that they may be trusted with the destruction of the Ring,

whose modesty also allows them to live in harmony with nature. The self-centred ambition of Melkor, Sauron and Saruman, on the other hand, means all has to give way to their ruthless self-interest.

### **The Limits of Evil**

In spite of all this, it is important to notice that the power of evil is limited—indeed, its power is infinitely less than that of the good. Evil cannot make anything of itself because it lacks powers of creativity. In particular, say "the wise", evil cannot create life: only good can do that.<sup>25</sup> The most that Melkor can do is to take something good, made by Iluvatar, and twist it to his own ends. Thus, according to Treebeard the Ent, trolls were made as a pale imitation of Ents, and Orcs are no more than a distorted form of elf.<sup>26</sup>

### **What is the Solution?**

On one level, the answer to the evil of Sauron and the Ring is in the hands of the inhabitants of Middle Earth. The Ring has to be destroyed, and then Sauron's power will fail too. In the end, it is their courage, friendship and self-sacrifice which will overcome and destroy evil. As a result, one of Tolkien's emphases is on people using their freewill to make wise choices.

### **The Responsible Use of Freewill**

For instance, when Frodo complains about the overwhelming responsibility he has been given, Gandalf offers him no consolation except that he must do his best to carry it out: "you



have been chosen, and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have."<sup>27</sup>

It turns out that Frodo does indeed have great strength and heart and wits, not least to make good use of his power to choose. Even when he is directly up against the power of Sauron and the Ring, he still has the ability to choose the right. At the end of the first volume, when he has put the Ring on to escape Boromir, he becomes aware that Sauron's eye can now see him, and is staring at him, and that Sauron's voice is trying to command him. Suddenly he is aware of himself again, and that he is "free to choose." He quickly chooses to take the Ring off his finger, Sauron can no longer find him, and the danger is past.<sup>28</sup>

### The Power of Mercy

But strong wills and good decisions alone are not enough to undermine the power of evil. The chief characters are also called on to exercise the "weak weapons" of mercy, forgiveness and pity.

Early on in the story, Frodo has not learned this, and so when he hears the story of Gollum and his evil, his spontaneous response is: "He deserves death." Gandalf rebukes him for taking upon himself the role of judge and jury and so quickly pronouncing a guilty verdict. Gandalf still has hopes that Gollum may be changed. More than that:

*My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that time comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many—yours not least."<sup>29</sup>*

This is a prophetic word. In fact, as the story unfolds, one after another the main characters show mercy to Gollum: Bilbo, of course (in *The Hobbit*), Gandalf, the elves (who are

supposed to keep him in captivity but take pity on him), Aragorn, and eventually Frodo and even Sam, who hates him most of all. As a result, as Gandalf foretold, Gollum is alive at the end of the story to play a crucial role in the fate of Frodo and of the Ring.

### The Possibility of Conversion

Mercy and pity may have other effects, however. After Frodo accepts Gollum as a guide (against the advice of Sam) and they journey together, it becomes ever clearer that there are two sides to Gollum's character—Gollum (the "bad" side) and Smeagol (the "good" side—Smeagol was his name before he came under the influence of the Ring), or Stinker and Slinker, as Sam dubs them.<sup>30</sup> From time to time, Gollum even talks to himself in these two different voices.

Frodo continues to be kind and generous to Gollum, even when Gollum is treacherous, and, as a result, Gollum comes close to what can only be called a conversion. On one occasion, he comes across Sam and Frodo asleep, and, as he watches Frodo, "A strange expression passed over his lean hungry face." He reaches out to touch Frodo's knee, and for the first and only time, he looks like what he truly is, or what he would have been had he never come across the Ring, "an old weary hobbit, shrunken by the years ... an old, starved, pitiable thing."<sup>31</sup>

What seems to be happening is that Gollum is responding to the patient love that Frodo has shown him, day in and day out. He appears to have tired of his evil Gollum persona, and is about to be transformed from a monster into the hobbit which he once was.<sup>32</sup> Just then, however, Sam wakes up, shouts angrily at Gollum, and the moment passes. Gollum is just Gollum again. In the next scene, he leads the hobbits into

the lair of the monster Shelob, and we never hear of Smeagol again.

### Strength in Weakness

To some, this kind of mercy and pity may seem like weak virtues. Revenge and justice come more naturally to us. Yet this is indicative of a deep underlying theme throughout the whole book, that true strength is to be found in weakness. This is why Gandalf and Galadriel refuse the ring: while they know that it would grant them a certain kind of power, they know too that their true strength exists only while they are weaker. This is why Elrond is willing for Frodo and Sam to be the bearers of the Ring. He has learned that sometimes the greatest deeds are done most effectively by the smallest people: “small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere.”<sup>33</sup>

Not everyone understands this, even on the side of good. In the third book, when Denethor learns of the decision of the council of Elrond, he protests to Gandalf that to trust “a witless halfling” with such a desperate mission is “madness.”<sup>34</sup> Yet it is not madness: it is deep and mysterious sanity. This is a secret that Sauron does not and cannot understand. For him, strength is always strength, and he exercises his wisdom on the premise that others think as he does. He assumes that those who have the Ring will want to set up a rival leader, and use the power of the Ring against him. The idea of not choosing a counterpart leader, and of actually destroying the Ring, never occurs to him. Thus Gandalf calls him a “wise fool”, able to be overcome by those who reject his kind of power, and who find wisdom in what Sauron would consider folly.<sup>35</sup>

The poet W.H. Auden said in reference to this passage:

*[evil] has every advantage but one—it is inferior in imagination. Good can imagine the possibility of becoming evil—hence the refusal of Gandalf and Aragorn to use the Ring—but evil, defiantly chosen, can no longer imagine anything but itself.*<sup>36</sup>

That is evil’s weakness and what destroys it in the end. While Sauron is looking out across the plains to where the army of his enemies is gathering, expecting the greatest threat to emerge from that quarter, two insignificant hobbits are struggling up Mount Doom behind him to do the inexplicable—destroy the Ring.<sup>37</sup>

But this conflict between the weak and the foolish on the one hand and the rich and powerful on the other takes its toll. To lay down your life for others, as Frodo does for his friends, is very costly. Frodo never fully recovers from the wound that the Dark Rider gives him at their first encounter, and when he returns home to the Shire after all his adventures, he is never really appreciated. He understands that one person’s loss is another person’s gain, and that this is the nature of reality.<sup>38</sup>

### A Supernatural Force

It’s not enough, however, to say that Middle Earth is saved by people who make good decisions and practice being brave and merciful, because that would not be the whole truth. There are hints through the book that something more is work here. For example, when Frodo asks why he has to be the one to bear the Ring, Gandalf implies that some sort of cosmic plan is being worked out in the story of the Ring: “Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and *not* by its maker. In which case you also were *meant* to have it.”<sup>39</sup> Elrond has a similar philosophy. He tells the council that will decide the future of the Ring that they have not met by chance; indeed, it is “ordered” that they should meet and consult.<sup>40</sup>

Clearly there has to be a mind to create the “meaning” that Gandalf discerns, and an authority to “order” the meeting of the council. So what power or force was it that meant Bilbo and then Frodo to have the Ring? Who or what is behind the coming together of the council? Is it just good luck that everybody has had pity on Gollum so that he is there at the end?

The answer, of course, is Iluvatar. Early in *The Silmarillion*, Iluvatar warned Melkor at the beginning of his rebellion:

*“And thou, Melkor, shalt see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth thus shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined.”<sup>41</sup>*

In the end, evil will be made to serve the good. This is because it is Iluvatar’s world: Iluvatar is ultimate reality, and Iluvatar’s desire for good and for life and for beauty will prevail.

One writer, Kenneth Pearson, points out that it is in the scene where the Ring is finally destroyed that the invisible hand of Iluvatar is most powerful. The drama of this ending, when Frodo fulfils his mission, and then he and Sam are snatched away from certain death by an eagle, is what Tolkien calls elsewhere a “eucatastrophe,” a good catastrophe.<sup>42</sup> It is as though the creator has intervened to reward those who have showed pity on Gollum by showing pity to them in turn. Tolkien actually wrote about this scene in a letter:

*Frodo ... spent every drop of his power and will and body, and that was just sufficient to bring him to the destined point and no further ... The Other Power then took over: the Writer of the Story (by which I do not mean myself), “that one ever-present Person who is never absent and never named” (as one critic has said).<sup>43</sup>*

In Tolkien’s mind, behind all the efforts of the human characters to defeat evil is the hand of Iluvatar, without whom there is no guarantee of success, guiding events and causing things to work out for the best.

## Where Are We Going?

As the story unfolds, there are glimpses of a happy ending. One of the most beautiful is when Sam, unable to sleep because he is overwhelmed by the difficulties he and Frodo are going through, suddenly notices a star. Somehow the constancy of the star speaks to him of the fact that good and beauty are finally indestructible. The Shadow which is Sauron is just that—a shadow—and will pass away. With this reassurance he is able to fall asleep, even though the immediate circumstances have not changed at all.<sup>44</sup>

Once more, *The Silmarillion* explains what is going on in the bigger picture. All Sam knows is that evil will pass away, and that light and beauty will triumph in the end. Yet is there any guarantee that this is not just wishful thinking on Sam’s part? There is an intriguing note in *The Silmarillion* which explains the reason for Sam’s intuition. The narrator explains that in the end the power of Iluvatar will overcome all evil, and the Ainur will once again make music, this time even more wonderful than that they made at the creation of Middle Earth.<sup>45</sup> What will make the music greater at the end is partly that the Children of Iluvatar will be present this time, which they were not at the beginning. But also, now, because of all that has taken place in Middle Earth and all they have gone through, they will have a much deeper understanding of themselves and of one another and of the music—and of Iluvatar himself.

So there are really two happy endings in the world of Middle Earth. The first is the defeat of Sauron, but that is really just a foretaste of the joy that is to come at the end of time when Melkor too is destroyed. When Sam hears the news that the Ring has indeed been destroyed and the power of Sauron has been broken, his absolute delight is a pale shadow of that final happy ending yet to come:

*"How do I feel?" he cried. "Well, I don't know how to say it. I feel, I feel"—he waved his arms in the air—"I feel like spring after winter, and sun on the leaves; and like trumpets and harps and all the songs I have ever heard!"*<sup>46</sup>

Frodo and Sam may not know how the story will work out in the end, but we know, and, in fact, Frodo and Sam have experienced something which is a sort of dress rehearsal for the end, though they do not know it yet.

## Conclusion

As I have thought about these ideas, I have realized that one reason *The Lord of the Rings* appeals to me as a Christian is that it is built around themes that resonate very deeply with Christian faith. Tolkien was himself a devout Christian of Roman Catholic persuasion, and he explained the connection between *The Lord of the Rings* and Christian faith like this:

*The Gospels [the stories of Jesus Christ] contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories ... But this story has entered History ... This story is supreme; and it is true. Art has been verified. God is the Lord, of angels, and of men—and of elves. Legend and history have met and fused.*<sup>47</sup>

In a sense, for Tolkien, the Christian story "embraces" the essence of *The Lord of the Rings*. In light of this, it should not

surprise us that all the themes that we have looked at in *The Lord of the Rings* are to be found in the stories and teachings of Jesus Christ and his followers: the fact that the world is created and is created good; the fact that we choose to do wrong; the destructiveness and alienation caused by pride; the answer to the world's pain and confusion in self-sacrifice and courage and mercy and solidarity.

The stories don't talk explicitly about any religion: it wouldn't be appropriate within the world of the story. But they do point beyond themselves. They seem to yearn for a greater fulfillment. It is surely no coincidence that the destruction of Sauron takes place on March 25th, which in Anglo-Saxon Christianity of 1800 years ago was held to be the date of the crucifixion of Christ.<sup>48</sup>

If, therefore, you find that you are drawn by the story of the *The Lord of the Rings*, if you find that these themes resonate for you—finding strength when you feel weak, valuing the qualities of mercy and pity, using your freewill wisely, turning evil to good—you owe it to yourself to check out the source from which Tolkien drew all those themes—the classic Christian faith, and especially the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.<sup>49</sup>

## Notes

1. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. H. Carpenter with C. Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 82. Cited in *The Philologist, the Fairy Story and the Faith: Christian Morality and Meaning in J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings*, by Kenneth N. Pearson (unpublished paper, Regent College, 1994). I am grateful to Kenneth Pearson for permission to make use of several of the insights discussed in this paper.
2. *The Two Towers*, IV:VIII, 739. (Roman numerals refer to the Book and Chapter; Arabic numbers are the pages in the one-volume edition of Unwin Paperbacks (1968)). Even at the end of the three stories, Sam is still musing about the nature of their story: "What a tale we have been in, Mr. Frodo, haven't we? ... I wish I could hear it told! ... And I wonder how it will go on after our part." *The Return of the King*, VI:IV, 986-987.
3. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (Allen and Unwin, 1977; HarperCollins, 1999), 67.
4. Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1984), 35.
5. *The Silmarillion*, 15. This singing of creation into being is reminiscent of C.S. Lewis' picture of the creation of Narnia in *The Magician's Nephew*, chapters 8 and 9.
6. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, II:III, 293.
7. *The Silmarillion*, 18.
8. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, I:XI, 210.
9. *The Silmarillion*, 16.
10. *The Silmarillion*, 18.
11. *The Silmarillion*, 31-32.
12. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, I:I, 45-47.

13. *The Return of the King*, VI:I, 946.
14. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, II:VI, 366.
15. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, I:II, 75.
16. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, II:VII, 385-386.
17. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, II:X, 418.
18. *The Return of the King*, VI:III, 981.
19. *The Two Towers*, IV:II, 659.
20. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, II:VIII, 391. See also Pearson, 10.
21. *The Two Towers*, III:II, 440.
22. *The Two Towers*, III:VIII, 577.
23. *The Two Towers*, IV:II, 657.
24. *The Two Towers*, IV:V, 708.
25. *The Silmarillion*, 50.
26. *The Two Towers*, III:IV, 507, cf. *The Return of the King*, 948. In fact, *The Silmarillion* (50) says that Orcs were made by Melkor out of elves whom he managed to capture and torture.
27. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, I:II, 74-75, cf. 64: "All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."
28. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, II:X, 421.
29. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, I:II, 73, cf. "Even Gollum was not wholly ruined" (68).
30. *The Two Towers*, IV:IX, 741.
31. *The Two Towers*, IV:VIII, 742.
32. Gandalf says of Gollum's family, "I guess they were of hobbit-kind." *The Fellowship of the Ring*, I:II, 66.
33. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 287 cf. "Help oft shall come from the hands of the weak when the Wise falter." *The Silmarillion*, 301.

34. *The Return of the King*, V:IV, 845.
35. *The Two Towers*, III:V, 518 cf. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, II:II, 287.
36. Cited by Pearson, 13, quoting T. Shippey, *The Road to Middle Earth* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985), 131.
37. *The Return of the King*, VI:III, 981.
38. *The Return of the King*, VI:IX, 1067.
39. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, I:II, 69.
40. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, II:II, 259.
41. *The Silmarillion*, 17.
42. "On Fairy Stories" in *Tree and Leaf* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964), 60.
43. Tolkien, *Letters*, 252-253.
44. *The Return of the King*, VI:III, 957.
45. *The Silmarillion*, 15-16.
46. *The Return of the King*, VI:IV, 988. Shortly afterwards, Sam's desire to hear a story about himself is granted: a minstrel of Gondor sings "of Frodo of the Nine Fingers and the Ring of Doom." Sam, we are told, "laughed aloud for sheer delight." (990).
47. "On Fairy Stories", 62-63.
48. *The Return of the King*, VI:IV, 988. Shippey points out that this was also recognized as the date of the annunciation and of the last day of creation, but in this context Christ's victory over evil through the crucifixion would seem to be the primary reference. (Shippey, 151.)
49. These are to be found in the four oldest biographies of Jesus, known as the Gospels, which are in *The New Testament*, the second part of *The Bible*.