

Engaging *The Lord of the Rings*¹

ABSTRACT

J.R.R. Tolkien's trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*² has grown enormously in public recognition in recent decades. In New Zealand, of course, it holds a particular fascination due to the outstanding success of the recent films. With the mounting appreciation has come a wide range of interpretations. In this essay I will highlight some of the Christian symbolism and theological implications of the themes and plot of this powerful epic.

Synopsis

It is first necessary to highlight the principal parts of the story.

Frodo Baggins is a little person, a *Hobbit*. He inherits a magic ring that makes the wearer invisible. Then he finds out that this is in fact the 'one ring', the supreme magical tool of domination. Its maker, the evil Sauron, has returned to power and, with his terrifying servants, the ring-wraiths, is searching for it. Led by the wise wizard Gandalf, Frodo sets out with seven other friends and companions to destroy the ring; he must cast it into the fire in which it was made, in the heart of

1. This article derives from an address given at Epsom Baptist Church in the winter of 2003 as part of a series on that also examined the Christian issues presented by C.S. Lewis' Narnia novels and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. I have added a section regarding Tolkien's motivations in writing and have given more emphasis to the value of story. However the structure reflects the fact that it was originally intended for oral presentation.

2. *The Lord of the Rings* (Allen & Unwin, 1954 (*The Fellowship of the Ring* & *The Two Towers*), 1955 (*The Return of the King*)).

the volcano, Mt. Doom. Along the way the party is split by ambush and treachery. Gandalf falls first, fighting a demon in the ancient dwarf city of Moria, now overrun by evil orcs. They are led thereafter by Aragorn, an heir of kings, but living as an outcast and a tracker in the wilds. Disaster strikes again when the entire company is attacked by the brutal Uruk Hai; orc servants of the wizard traitor Saruman. Only one of the company is slain; the noble warrior Boromir, killed defending two of Frodo's hobbit friends. The two hobbits are carried off to Saruman who is seeking the ring for himself. Frodo and his friend Sam escape into the wild. The remnant of the company pursue the orcs and their captives.

Through many adventures, Frodo's hobbit friends and their pursuers are reunited, and each has their part to play as war is unleashed across middle-earth; the forces of Sauron marching to enslave the remaining free peoples. All this time Frodo and Sam are making their way towards the land of Mordor and Mt Doom. For part of the way Gollum, a withered hobbit-like creature who also once bore the ring, and is now consumed by lust for it, acts as their guide. Finally, weakened and beyond hope, they come to their goal.

Here, Frodo finally gives in to the power, the lure and temptation of the ring that has been eating away at his mind and soul throughout. Instead of casting it away as he intended, he puts it on and claims it for himself. In so doing he directly challenges Sauron and becomes visible to him. At this crisis point, when the fate of Tolkien's entire world hangs in the balance, Gollum hysterically wrestles the ring from Frodo, biting it from his finger. In his madness, however, he tumbles into the fire, destroying himself and the evil that had already destroyed his soul. Thus Sauron is unmade, along with his ring, and everyone else lives happily ever after – sort of.

The power of fantasy

What is in this, then, for Christian thinkers? Why should we be interested in a fairy story? Just because it was voted the best book of the twentieth century? Because it is the flagship of the NZ film industry? We should certainly be informed about the major landmarks of our own culture, but fairy stories have a value beyond that. Tolkien's own arguments in this regard are instructive. In a 1938 essay, 'On Fairy Stories', written as he was completing *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien set out his understanding of the significance and role of this literary genre.³ For the sake of brevity I shall summarise his position.

Firstly, he says, we 'make' because we yet bear the image of a Maker. Thus fantasy is an appropriate expression of Human being. Secondly, it is a means of recovery; fantasy writing can help us to see familiar things in a new way. In so doing it helps us to pay attention to what we have taken for granted and thereby more greatly appreciate the gifts and treasures that are ours. Thirdly, it is escape. Tolkien goes to some pains to differentiate the escape of the prisoner from the flight of the deserter. Escape, he says, is natural and proper and may be a just response to evil – a suitable resistance that arms the oppressed against what is ugly. Finally, fantasy is consolation – it is a means of inspiring in the human heart the hope for a good ending – maybe even of an escape from the evil of death. This brings his argument to its culmination in a speculation that what is conveyed to us in the gospel story is, in fact, the fulfilment of the longings and needs that are otherwise discovered and expressed in fantasy. Thus all fantasy can

3. J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (London: Unwin, 1964), 11-70.

be seen, in some way, to point to the gospel. Tolkien's own fantasies, as we shall see, do so very convincingly indeed.

Much of what Tolkien explained carefully in his essay, he expressed more delightfully in the 1929 poem 'Mythopoeia', part of which is reproduced here. The poem is addressed by Philomythus ('lover of myths') to Misomythus ('hater of myths') who said that myths were lies and therefore worthless, even though 'breathed through silver'. The 'hater of myths' in question turns out to have been none other than C.S. Lewis, and the poem a distillation of conversation the two academics enjoyed at Magdalen college with another friend one evening. Lewis later credited that conversation as a key element of his conversion, and his later works certainly attest much of what Tolkien here argues:

The heart of man is not compound of lies,
but draws some wisdom from the only Wise,
and still recalls him. Though now long estranged,
man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.
Dis-graced he may be, yet is not dethroned,
and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned,
his world-dominion by creative act:
not his to worship the great Artefact,
man, sub-creator, the refracted light
through whom is splintered from a single White
to many hues, and endlessly combined
in living shapes that move from mind to mind.
Though all the crannies of the world we filled
with elves and goblins, though we dared to build
gods and their houses out of dark and light,
and sow the seed of dragons, 'twas our right
(used or misused). The right has not decayed.
We make still by the law in which we're made.

Yes, 'wish-fulfilment dreams' we spin to cheat
our timid hearts and ugly Fact defeat
Whence came the wish, and whence the power to
dream,
or some things fair and others ugly deem?
All wishes are not idle, nor in vain
fulfilment we devise — for pain is pain,
not for itself to be desired, but ill;
or else to strive or to subdue the will
alike were graceless; and of Evil this
alone is dreadly certain: Evil is.

Blessed are the timid hearts that evil hate,
that quail in its shadow, and yet shut the gate;
that seek no parley, and in guarded room,
though small and bare, upon a clumsy loom
weave tissues gilded by the far-off day
hoped and believed in under Shadow's sway.

Blessed are the men of Noah's race that build
their little arks, though frail and poorly filled,
and steer through winds contrary towards a wraith,
a rumour of a harbour guessed by faith.

Blessed are the legend makers with their rhyme
of things not found within recorded time.
It is not they that have forgot the Night,
or bid us flee to organized delight,
in lotus-isles of economic bliss
forswearing souls to gain a Circe-kiss
(and counterfeit at that, machine-produced,
bogus seduction of the twice-seduced).

Such isles they saw afar, and ones more fair,
and those that hear them yet may yet beware.

They have seen Death and ultimate defeat,
and yet they would not in despair retreat,
but oft to victory have turned the lyre
and kindled hearts with legendary fire,
illuminating Now and dark Hath-been
with light of suns as yet by no man seen.

I would that I might with the minstrels sing
and stir the unseen with a throbbing string.
I would be with the mariners of the deep
that cut their slender planks on mountains steep
and voyage upon a vague and wandering quest,
for some have passed beyond the fabled West.
I would with the beleaguered fools be told,
that keep an inner fastness where their gold,
impure and scanty, yet they loyally bring
to mint in image blurred of distant king,
or in fantastic banners weave the sheen
heraldic emblems of a lord unseen.

I will not walk with your progressive apes,
erect and sapient. Before them gapes
the dark abyss to which their progress tends
—if by God's mercy progress ever ends,
and does not ceaselessly revolve the same
unfruitful course with changing of a name.
I will not treat your dusty path and flat,
denoting this and that by this and that,
your world immutable wherein no part
the little maker has with maker's art.
I bow not yet before the Iron Crown,
nor cast my own small golden sceptre down⁴.

4. Printed in *Tree and Leaf* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1988).

In this poem one feels the emotional and rational force – the practically religious conviction – of Tolkien's belief in the story-telling art as a great good, as a gift and a grace in itself. He is defending it against a worldview that would consign all that is non-scientific to the attics of human endeavour.

Engaging the story

So when Tolkien set himself 'to try to tell a really long story'⁵ what did he come up with? What is it that we find in this pre-eminent example, this great-grandfather of the Fantasy Genre?

Firstly, It is the tale of a journey. The Hobbits at its centre set out from their homes out of necessity, and find themselves travelling further and further as they become more deeply involved in the great quest that could bring their world to a terrible end or free it from darkest evil. Along the way, the characters of the 'little people', deliberately intended by Tolkien to represent the common people of his beloved Britain,⁶ develop and grow as they encounter greater dangers than they had ever imagined. They become part of a greater story than the small tales⁷ of their own part in the affairs of the age. As with most 'journey' stories, the geographical distance travelled is commensurate with change within the lives of the key characters;

5. Tolkien's own words in the foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*.

6. Tolkien said of himself 'I am in fact a hobbit' and later 'The Hobbits are just rustic English people, made small in size because it reflects the generally small reach of their imagination – not the small reach of their courage or latent power' – H. Carpenter, *JRR Tolkien: A Biography* (Allen & Unwin, 1977), 179-180.

7. A key self-reflexive moment in Tolkien's story occurs as Sam realises (Ch.8 Bk. 4) that their own 'story' is still part of the great story that he has heard parts of in the legends of Middle-earth; that is, Tolkien's far wider-reaching mythology, outlined largely in the *Silmarillion*.

the movement across difficult terrain is an accompaniment to the movement of the plot.

The image of mission as journey is natural to Christians, whose thinking begins with the story of Jesus - often itself presented as a 'journey' story. John conceives of Jesus as coming from the realm of eternity, into 'the world' and back to his father (John 1.9-14; 16:28) and Paul quotes a hymn which explicitly traces Jesus' descent and return to glory (Phil. 2:6-11). The Gospel of Luke is set out as one long Journey as Jesus travels to his end in Jerusalem - and challenges his disciples to follow him: 'Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple' (Luke 14:27). The hall-mark of discipleship is that it requires a costly commitment; the dedication to pick up a task and see it through.

This is a basic theme to *The Lord of the Rings*. At one point Sam is invited to give up the task and return home. He replies 'I know we are going to take a very long road, into darkness; but I know I can't turn back. ...I don't rightly know what I want: but I have something to do before the end...I must see it through'⁸.

And of course, Jesus is the supreme example of perseverance on a hard road. As the writer to the Hebrews put it: 'Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who

8. Ch. 4, Bk. 1.

endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.' (Heb. 12:1-3)

Few people, if any, have a completely easy life, but those who follow Jesus must expect that they will encounter hardships. Also that those hardships will change them, strengthening their character⁹. Like the journey of Frodo and his companions, like the journey of Jesus, the Christian journey is made necessary and made perilous by the reality of evil.

The Reality of Evil. Tolkien lived through the dark days of two world wars. In his writings, evil is real. Alongside the truly demonic Sauron, utterly dedicated to evil, are those who are corrupted by despair or by greed or by pride or all these together, as indeed was Sauron in his beginnings.

Saruman, a mighty wizard, wise and dedicated to the service of the creator succumbs to the desire to wield power for himself and becomes a mini-demon, in the image of Sauron. Denethor, ruler of the last remnants of the great kingdom of Gondor, resists the overwhelming armies massed against him, sleepless and vigilant. But as he grows ever more aware of how hopeless is his battle and how powerful is his enemy he falls into despair. Unable to live as a Proud and powerful ruler he chooses death instead; he abandons his responsibilities, his city and his army, and his own son, condemning them to death as he rushes into its embrace himself. Though he resisted evil to the end, pride and despair worked a terrible evil in him. Gollum began life as a simple enough fellow - but desired to be more than a simple fellow. Through murder and treachery He grasped after power and ended his days betraying and killing himself, gnawed on by his cravings like an old bone.

9. Heb. 2:10, 5:8; Rom. 5:3-4.

Then there are those who are tempted to evil, or at least to use evil means for clearly good ends - and who successfully resist. Gandalf, knowing the power of the Ring, knowing his own severe need, refuses even to touch the thing lest he becomes ensnared by its lure. The elven-queen Galadriel, put to the test in exactly the same way chooses instead to accept that her own power will fade and allows the ring to pass her by. Faramir, Denethor's son, faces the same temptation but he has made a promise to not touch it. A commitment of courtesy to his guests prevents him from wresting it from them by force. His own integrity of character, his commitment to simple virtues, protects him from evil.

Sadly, for Boromir, his brother, the noble warrior who died defending two hobbits the outcome is different. Frodo and Sam fled the company because of Boromir. Looking for any tool which would win him victory in battle, Boromir desired the ring and tried to take it by force. He failed, because Frodo escaped him, and thus he had the chance to redeem himself in defending the two younger hobbits and in confessing his failure to Aragorn.

Tolkien knew the reality of evil and the way it acts in the lives of women and men. So did the biblical writers. James provides a good example.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts ... But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says, 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.' Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. (James 4:1-8)

Evil is real, but God assists those who resist it. When we see the depth and breadth of Evil in our world it can seem overwhelming. When Frodo wishes that the evil should not have arisen in his time, Gandalf responds with sage advice. 'So do I,' says Gandalf, 'and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.'¹⁰

In the face of monstrous evil; the child kidnapping that feeds the sex industry, the weapons industry that needs wars or the consumerism that needs the sweated labour working in cesspits throughout Asia; in the face of evil what is our task? It is to resist.

How then should we resist?

The apostle Paul writes to the Ephesians to (6.15) 'take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm'. We do everything, using every weapon given us by God, and we stand, firm, in the face of evil. It is not required of us that we win outright merely that we faithfully stick to our guns and fight as we may. As Tolkien has Gandalf say: '...it is not our part to master all the tides of the world but to do what is in us for the succour of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule'¹¹

We need not be anxious that the evils we face are beyond us, we need merely do what is in us - do what we may and not cease to oppose evil with the Goodness of God.

10. Ch. 2, Bk. 1.

11. Ch. 9, Bk. 5.

Temptation. Evil takes many forms but temptation, especially the temptation of power, is a common experience. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the ring itself is both the agent and object of this temptation. It is desired by many, but not only is it desperately sought after, it also actively works to increase that desire in those nearby. It eats away at people's minds and will, weighing them down, promising strength and joy and freedom¹² and delivering slavery.

It sounds, in fact, very like a description of addiction.

Those who are addicted to any drug (Alcohol, tobacco, Valium), those who are addicted to ordinarily good things like food, or sex or work, and those who are addicted to power know what it feels like to be a slave, to be horribly bound to something that you know will eventually kill you.

James declares 'Blessed is anyone who endures temptation.' Not, 'blessed is the one who has never felt tempted' but 'blessed is the one who *endures* temptation. 'Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him....one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death.' (James 1:12-15).

This progression from unholy desire to death is outlined perfectly in Tolkien's great story. As a mature Christian, he knew not only the trials of temptation but also the truth of Scripture, and these realities constantly flow from his pen and are woven into his work.

So we are on a journey and the journey is made painful and difficult by evil without and temptation within. Where do

12. See Sam's experience in Ch 1, Bk. 6.

we find the resources to deal with such evil? Such temptations? Frodo is almost overwhelmed by the demands made on him in his journey. He accepts, however, that he is chosen to bear the burden he carries; 'Not', says Gandalf, 'for any merit that others do not possess: not for power or wisdom at any rate. But you have been chosen, and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have...and now...the decision lies with you.' 'But' he goes on, 'I will always help you. I will help you bear this burden as long as it is yours to bear.'¹³

Here is an acute summary of the Christian situation. We are chosen, not because we are especially wise or powerful, but we are chosen nevertheless, to follow our Lord on the way of the Cross. And we must use whatever is in us for the bearing of our burdens. For many this would be a truly overwhelming situation; facing the mismatch between the demands of following Jesus on the one hand and our own terrible inadequacies on the other were it not for that voice which says, 'I will always help you'. In Gandalf's words we hear an echo of Christ's promises. 'Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age' 'Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.' 'In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!'

On our journey we are strengthened by the companionship of Christ.

Is Gandalf a type of Christ?

Has Tolkien written a Christian allegory Like Lewis' Narnia stories? Gandalf is clearly a supernatural being; he had a heav-

13. Ch. 2, Bk. 1.

only existence before he entered the world of men. He died a sacrificial death, giving his life for his companion's, and was then returned to earth in a new body. But Gandalf is clearly a subservient being. While he is consistently Christ-like he is no Christ. His death did not bring salvation for all and he is clearly not a King – in fact one of his strengths is his great humility, his willingness to serve in lowly ways. Again, very Christlike, but not, after all, the high King of Heaven. More the form of a ministering angel. And that is, in fact, how Tolkien describes Gandalf.¹⁴

What about Aragorn? The final third of Tolkien's trilogy is called 'The Return of the King'. Now there's a Christian catch-phrase if ever I heard one. Aragorn is the scorned outsider, the outcast who comes from the wild and overturns the enemy in a terrible battle, then, fulfilling the old prophecies, takes up his kingship in the great city. He is a healer and a warrior and a just and merciful judge. Is Aragorn Tolkien's Christ? No, because good as he is he is not God. He is a mortal man, doomed to die.

What, then, of Frodo? The real hero at the centre of the story, Frodo, the obscure, is the one who suffers betrayal from his companions. He is the one who takes evil into himself in order to destroy it. Isn't that exactly what Christ did for us on the cross? And Frodo's work really did achieve salvation for all. But Frodo is no less mortal than Aragorn. Even though, in the end, he is 'translated' rather like Enoch and does not suffer death as does Aragorn, he is really no more than your common or garden variety hobbit after all.

14. 'The Istari' in Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales* (Allen & Unwin, GB, 1980).

In fact, unlike Lewis's Aslan in the Narnia stories, Tolkien does not have a clear Christ figure. This is because Tolkien was not doing the same thing that Lewis was doing. Lewis deliberately wrote a story in which Christ appeared as a character in the story. Tolkien is not writing the Christian story but writing a story *as a Christian*. Christ does not appear as a character in Tolkien's cast but many of his characters do have Christian qualities - and thus they have value for us.

What resources do we have on the road? We have the stories of those who have gone before and if some of those stories, like the 'Pilgrim's Progress', are fictional they nevertheless show us clearly how Christians can live and work when faced with evil. Tolkien's characters are not Christ-figures but they are clearly Christian figures. Paul wrote to the Corinthians 'Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.' (1 Cor. 11:1). It is open to us to imitate any figure that imitates Christ. Tolkien's writings are full of them.

To return to that promise of Gandalf; those promises of Jesus - that we shall have help on the road. Jesus himself lives within us - but even when we are so distracted or stricken down that his voice seems silent we are not supposed to be alone. Because the company of the Holy Spirit, the church, comforts us. The first volume of Tolkien's trilogy is 'the Fellowship of the Ring'. The fellowship was not perfect and suffered from division within and difficulty without. But they came through their trials because they were together and had made the commitment to stay together. Thus Frodo in middle-Earth, and all burden-bearers in this world, have help and strength for the road.

Conclusion

Finally, what about the end of the road?

Discipleship is a journey which changes us. When we come to our destination we may no longer fit in – like Frodo we may find that our true home – and our true healing – lie elsewhere, beyond the borders of our world. We may not settle here because this is not our home. It is our birthing chamber and our nursery but not our final destination. To make it so is to turn away from the good that God has offered us and to turn the good things that he has already given us into the means of our destruction.

We need to keep one eye at least on the true home of humanity; on the heavenly city that waits for us. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it ‘...for here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.’ (Heb. 13:14). Paul wrote similarly to the Corinthians and the Philippians that though he was glad to be in the body so as to do the Lord’s work, his preference was to be at home with the Lord himself.

Do we accept the burden of being Christian? Do we take up the challenge of the Cross? Dare we walk that road in the footsteps of the Master? If so, then we shall face evil and temptation. All we are required to do is to stand against it, and we shall have the Grace of our Lord to strengthen us, his church to comfort us, and Christ himself as our final destination. Tolkien understood these truths and they shine through his writing. They are truths of a transcendent nature and only accessible from within a greater story than the small stories of our own lives, or the even smaller stories of the ‘facts’ of our existence. In drawing us into a realm of bigger truths than positivistic science is able to offer, Tolkien holds high his own ‘small golden sceptre’ and refuses to bow down to soulless

evil or the evil of soullessness. In entering into his 'fairy-tale' world with him, we allow him to teach us more about following Jesus than we might learn from a more didactic lesson. Story, as was well understood by the gospel writers and by Jesus himself, has always been an effective means of communicating truth.

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