

11-2001

The Lord of the Rings and the Christian Way

Nathan Sytsma
Calvin College

Follow this and additional works at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sytsma, Nathan (2001) "The Lord of the Rings and the Christian Way," *Inklings Forever*: Vol. 3 , Article 11.
Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol3/iss1/11

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for the Study of C.S. Lewis & Friends at Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Inklings Forever* by an authorized editor of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact pillars@taylor.edu.

The Lord of the Rings and the Christian Way

Cover Page Footnote

Undergraduate Student Essay First Place Student Essay Winner

INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume III

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Second
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

Taylor University 2001

Upland, Indiana

The Lord of the Rings and the Christian Way

Nathan Sytsma

The Lord of the Rings and the Christian Way

Nathan Sytsma

Fantasy. These three diminutive syllables have a tendency to provoke strong reactions. "I love it!" proclaims one friend, then proceeds to list the hack novels he has read recently. Among academics, the word seems to produce raised eyebrows and pained re-adjustment of glasses. In Western culture, "true fantasy" seems like an oxymoron. Yet Ursula K. Le Guin writes, "Fantasy is true, of course. It isn't factual, but it is true" (Le Guin 34). Amidst the dandelion-like growth of the genre in recent years, one easily forgets that 20th century fantasy's foremost contributor, J.R.R. Tolkien, was a Christian scholar who intended his work to be serious and spiritual, and to be true.

Professor Tolkien was especially fascinated by myth, and he began to see "splinters of light"—splinters of divine revelation and truth—in supposedly pagan myths. Tolkien viewed myth as humanity's way to mumble God's truth, and so he chose to write a myth—a fairy story or fantasy work that would be true, if not factual. In a sense, *The Lord of the Rings* is his Christian myth. It generally avoids specific references to religion, "For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism" (Letters 288). As *The J.R.R. Tolkien Handbook* maintains, "The meaning, in fact, is implicit rather than explicit. It is incarnate in the whole world of the story" (Duriez 60). This does not mean, however, that the professor buried Christian themes so deeply as to make them unreachable. How exactly did Tolkien ally Christianity with fantasy, fairy story, and myth? Tolkien's magnum opus, *The Lord of the Rings*, shows itself as a specifically Chris-

tian work in its treatment of, among other things, self-sacrifice and eschatology.

The theme of selfless sacrifice in *The Lord of the Rings* is inescapable; it is perhaps the book's most strikingly theological motif. Even when discussing the Christian's final joy, Tolkien writes, "The Christian has still to work, with mind as well as body, to suffer, hope, and die" (Hallett 287). In this vein, Tolkien's great work depicts characters journeying, suffering, and above all, responding to the call to sacrifice themselves for the good of others. According to Stratford Caldecott, "It is, at bottom, a Christian myth, in which 'the first will be last and the last will be first.'" (Pearce 115). The protagonists succeed and receive reward to the degree that they renounce personal comfort and ambition. One could say that *The Lord of the Rings*, like Christianity, is preoccupied with self-sacrifice.

Tolkien develops the theme of selfless giving in each of the main characters, beginning with Gandalf. Joseph Pearce quotes from Paul Pfothenauer's article, "Christian Themes in Tolkien," which stresses "the recurring theme of the Suffering Servant who gives himself willingly, even unto death, that others might live" (Pearce 109). The character of Gandalf, through his death in Moria, exemplifies the theme of selfless suffering. Known as a wizard in *The Lord of the Rings*, he leads the fellowship of protagonists with his wisdom and supernatural abilities. As the fellowship flees from the caves of Moria over a chasm-spanning bridge, however, he literally meets his match, an evil spirit called a Balrog. "I must hold the narrow way," he tells his companions, echoing the

narrow way that Jesus preached, before he gives “even unto death” to fend off evil (Tolkien 321). The confrontation between Gandalf and the Balrog is one of the few times when we see a character explicitly appeal to a Higher Authority. “You cannot pass,” Gandalf declares to the evil spirit (Tolkien 322). Yet he invokes neither his own powers, nor those of a companion, nor even of “magic.” Instead, the wizard asserts, “I am a servant of the Secret Fire, wielder of the flame of Anor” (Tolkien 322). He shows himself to be, as a Roman centurion said to Jesus, “a man under authority” (NIV, Matthew 7:8). The centurion understood Jesus’ source of authority to be submission to his Father; Jesus sacrificed his own interests to seek those of his Father. Tolkien depicts Gandalf in a similar position, powerful inasmuch as he sacrifices personal benefit and serves a Higher Authority.

Despite this power, however, Gandalf must still plunge deathward alongside the Balrog; he must still “suffer, hope, and die.” As we discover later, Gandalf goes on to journey through a deep underworld, battle on the heights, die, and be “sent back—for a brief time, until [his] task is done” (Tolkien 491). Again, the phrasing is not that of the personal power that one might expect from a fantasy wizard or mythic figure; he is “sent back” by some Higher Power. In his underworld journey, Gandalf can be seen as a type of epic hero, such as Odysseus, Aeneas, or Beowulf. But, as James Obertino notes, Tolkien takes the form beyond tradition, for Gandalf actually dies, returning only for a specific time and task. In this purposeful death and resurrection, Gandalf reflects not merely an epic hero, but Christ. The incident’s strands of self-sacrifice, heroism and Christianity are tied together by Obertino, who writes, “The Christian precept ‘Greater love hath no man

than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends’ (John 15:13) pairs love with the willing self-sacrifice of death, and the god-hero of Christendom would for Tolkien be the principal exemplar of self-sacrifice for love” (Obertino 231). Gandalf, like the god-hero Jesus, relinquishes his personal claims to greatness in order to defend his friends and, ultimately, to defend the mission that defeats evil. Consequently, he is raised back to life. Each “wise man”—Gandalf and Christ—returns radiant, his self-sacrifice justified. Perhaps the numbered days of Gandalf’s victorious return are even analogous to Christ’s brief time on earth after His resurrection. Through Gandalf, Tolkien develops the Christian theme of self-sacrifice “even unto death,” with resurrection in store for the faithful servant.

The hobbit Frodo, along with his servant Sam, lies at the heart of *The Lord of the Rings*’ Suffering Servant theme. During the council at which the fate of the Ring—potent with the Enemy’s power—is decided, Frodo willingly takes on himself the burden of bearing the Ring. “I will take the Ring,” he said, “though I do not know the way” (Tolkien 264). Frodo’s words have in them the core of Jesus’ words to Simon Peter: “The spirit is willing, but the body is weak” (NIV, Mark 14:38). The Ring, though powerful, is no Sword-in-the-stone; it is a bitter cup, full of temptation and corruption. And while Frodo, like Jesus, is humanly incapable of carrying the cup of lamentation, he is willing. How does Frodo’s attitude relate to Christianity? Romans 5:7 states, “Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man,” yet Christ chose to die in order to save the world that he loved. In the movies and books of our culture, heroes and heroines sacrifice themselves for romantic love, for the hope of honor, or even for revenge. They will save the world for a lover, for self, or for a memory. Rarely, however,

does a protagonist give “even unto death” because it is his duty and joy to serve—because it is right. Yet Tolkien paints protagonists who defeat the Enemy by giving up their own agenda, confounding the Enemy, Sauron, with their selflessness. Unlike the confident, often violent, heroes of the movie screen and much fantasy literature, the central characters are physically weak, though mentally and spiritually strong.

Frodo takes upon himself the instrument of Darkness in order to destroy Darkness, just as Jesus bore an instrument of Death in order to destroy Death. As Joseph Pearce emphasizes, Frodo “had not sought the burden, but once it had been laid upon his reluctant shoulders he accepted it, and the sacrifice it involved, becoming a suffering servant to a greater good” (Pearce 112). That sacrifice involves plunging into Sauron’s domain, becoming, like Jesus, “a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering” (*NIV*, Isaiah 53:3). It involves sacrificing himself to win life for the many, just as “Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people” (*NIV*, Hebrews 9:28). Theologian Colin Gunton sums up Frodo’s theological significance when he writes, “Like Jesus, Frodo goes into the heart of the enemy’s realm in order to defeat him. And like him he is essentially weak and defenceless in worldly terms, but finally strong and invincible because he refuses to use the enemy’s methods” (Pearce 118).

At the same time, Frodo is not merely a type of the historical Christ; he also typifies the Christian walk, the “dying to self” through which the living Christ becomes more and more a part of a believer’s life. Sam, as his follower, makes the type of a humble, growing, suffering Christian even more accessible, and draws into special focus Jesus’ teaching. “The greatest among you will be a servant,” declared Jesus, “For whoever exalts himself will be

humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (*NIV*, Matthew 23:11-12). Frodo and Sam choose continually to be “last,” to be lesser so that others will be greater. “For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God,” exhorts the apostle Paul. “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature” (*NIV*, Colossians 3:3,5). Along the lines of this Christian precept, Frodo and Sam put to death their dreams both of a quiet hobbit life and of grandeur, instead journeying in secret, closer and closer to the heart of Evil. Time and again, they must face temptation and choose rightly. In the Elvish land of Lothlorien, Sam is confronted with the prospect of destruction happening at home. Still, he puts to death his desire to turn back. “No, I’ll go home by the long road with Mr. Frodo, or not at all,” he says, in a touching display of courage and loyalty (Tolkien 354). Frodo endures temptation on Amon Hen, the hill of sight, when he wears the Ring and sees the whole world spread out before him. The Enemy’s Eye nearly finds him, and he must choose to resist its allure by taking off the Ring. The scene is loosely reminiscent of the temptation of Jesus, when Satan took him to a high place and showed him the kingdoms of the earth. Both Frodo and Jesus reject selfishness and choose self-denial. On the very edge of Mordor—the Enemy’s Hell into which Frodo and Sam must journey—Frodo appears to die. Sam, taking up the Ring, must choose either to continue the quest or to claim the Ring for himself. Up to this point, his actions have reflected the tradition of honorable English servants, but here Tolkien demands from Sam even higher sacrifice. “Already the Ring tempted him, gnawing at his will and reason. Wild fantasies arose in his mind,” writes Tolkien (Tolkien 880). Yet Sam also puts that desire to death.

Frodo and Sam's self-sacrifice carries them into Mordor—a far more nightmarish hell than that of Gandalf's trials—where “the air was full of fumes; breathing was painful and difficult; and a dizziness came on them, so that they staggered and often fell” (Tolkien 918). Ragged, exhausted, famished, in pain, despairing—they press on. Sam sacrifices profoundly. He staggers under the weight of Frodo, who is too weak to even walk, toiling through Hell in hopes of somehow saving the world through such “foolishness.” It is difficult to find a less egotistical fantasy figure. Sam gives up his rights—to a peaceful life in the Shire, to the Ring, and even to his own body as he bears Frodo. Frodo and Sam, in their selfless brokenness, reveal an alternative to “temporary personal omnipotence” (Pearce 114). Eventually, the two hobbits do reach the end of their quest, and through an unusual turn of events the Ring is finally destroyed. In the cataclysm that follows, Frodo and Sam fall one last time, “worn out, or choked with fumes and heat, or stricken down by despair at last, hiding their eyes from death” (Tolkien 930). At this point, Frodo, like Christ, has finally given the ultimate sacrifice, while he and Sam, like Christians, have reached the end of their journey, the utter extent of their self-sacrifice. They “die” for the last time, to awaken as heroes. As Colin Duriez states, “In Tolkien's Middle-Earth, ultimately the meek inherit the world” (Duriez 113). At long last, the last become first.

As much as the suffering and journey themselves, the way in which the self-sacrificial quest comes to an end reflects Tolkien's Christianity. Eschatology in *The Lord of the Rings*—its approach to the end times—has a deep Christian resonance. The way in which Tolkien portrays Middle-Earth's ultimate end similarly reflects his devout beliefs.

With his concept of eucatastrophe, applied in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien explores Christian joy at the end of time. In his famous essay, “On Fairy-Stories,” he describes eucatastrophe as the opposite of tragedy, or dycatastrophe, and the highest function of any fairy story or myth like *The Lord of the Rings*. While facing the reality of sorrow and failure, this joy “denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief” (Hallett 285). Tolkien goes on to outline his conviction that such unexpected, moving joy at the end of a fantasy story may be “a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth,” a “far-off gleam or echo of evangelium in the real world” (Hallett 286). What is this evangelium? To the Christian, it is the victory of Christ's work on the cross infusing the world with healing and joy, God's redemption at work in the world. “The Evangelium has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them, especially the ‘happy ending’,” writes Tolkien (Hallett 287). In effect, Tolkien says that Christians can claim the consolation of a fantasy, fairy story, or myth's “happy ending” as a celebratory echo of Jesus' victory. His triumph and resurrection also feed the hope of the Christian for a final “happy ending.” They spur on the crying in which “[t]he Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’” to the One who will make all things whole (*NIV*, Revelation 22:17). As such, eucatastrophe in stories is a prophetic hint of God's good working at present and to come in the world. The joy induced by an unexpected ecstatic “turn” at a story's ending “looks forward. . .to the Great Eucatastrophe” (Hallett 287). In Christian understanding, this will be upon Jesus' return, when he throws down evil and reclaims paradise, when “our Lord God Almighty reigns” and “the wedding of the

Lamb has come" (NIV, Revelation 19:6,7).

In *The Lord of the Rings*' final chapters, Tolkien puts to practical use the imagery of a victory, a reigning Lord, and a wedding. If Christian eschatology is not a specific accomplice to this "happy ending," it is strongly implicated. First off, good delivers a decisive blow to evil. That Tolkien portrays two sides—black and white in their clarity—is crucial. In a world of increasingly relativistic values, the Christian faith still affirms right and wrong, viewing history as a struggle between heaven and the dragon, God and Satan. Tolkien, rather than depicting a personal or national victory, shows the cosmic triumph of goodness. Mordor's Black Gate crumbles, the men of the east and the south are defeated, and even the Eagles are involved with the victory. While the hobbits' original journey from the Shire southward is fraught with danger, their return is free from peril. This victory decisively changes the whole of Middle-Earth, anticipating the time when God's final victory will decisively change our world. "The hands of the King are hands of healing," as the character Aragorn claims his rightful place at the head of the kingdom (Tolkien 935). The King sits on his throne, pronouncing judgments and ushering in a new reign. The humble hobbits receive honor, and the land nearly bursts with singing and rejoicing. As if this was not enough, a long-awaited wedding finally takes place. "And Aragorn the King Elessar wedded Arwen Undómiel in the City of the Kings upon the day of Midsummer, and the tale of their long waiting and labours was come to fulfillment" (Tolkien 951). With his diction growing formal and excessive, it seems that even the author becomes caught up in this joyous eucatastrophe. Still, the final chapters of *The Lord of the Rings* look forward to an even more complete ending.

The continuing presence of evil ne-

cessitates a final renewal to come. Healing must grow through the slow budding of love and mercy. And though the final outcome of the struggle between good and evil has been determined, Middle-Earth will not heal entirely from evil's scars until the end of time. Frodo, weakened by the struggle, must pass on to the next world to await the completion of goodness in Middle-Earth. Again, in his literal voyage to the West—to Paradise—he models a Christian view of human mortality. Everyone—even those who look forward with expectation to a renewed world—will leave this globe. Christians hope, however, that they will be biding time, healing and relating as they anticipate returning to a world made perfect. In such a view, both Frodo and the Christian pass on, but they do not give up on the world.

While Tolkien too passed on before completing his mythology, his work anticipates an ultimate end both to Middle-Earth and to the struggle played out there. In Tolkien's world, evil will not continue forever, waxing and waning in some dualist dance with good. Tolkien writes in a letter, "According to [the mythology] there was at first an actual Earthly Paradise...." (Letters 237). Among other things, this included the Two Trees, Laurelin and Telperion, which lit the Blessed Realm with their golden and silvery lights glimmering in turn. Genesis 2 records a similar pair in the Garden of Eden: the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. In both Middle-Earth and the Bible, a Fall destroys Paradise's perfection, introducing evil's corruption as the opponent of good. Tolkien's Two Trees—along with their descendants—wither, while the tree motif disappears for most of the Old Testament. Yet in the final chapters of *The Lord of the Rings*, a sapling "whose white petals shone like the sunlit snow" reappears, a scion of Telperion to replace the barren tree in the King's city

(Tolkien 950). "The sign has been given," says Aragorn, "and the day is not far off" (Tolkien 951). In the story, the day of which he speaks is the day when his bride will arrive. But seen in the context of a "Christian myth," Aragorn's words evoke the Christian's earnest expectation for the imminent Great Wedding, when the King and the Bride will be finally united. Here again, at the end of the biblical story, we find the tree of life, whose leaves "are for the healing of the nations" (NIV, Revelation 22:2).

The Christian eschatological hope—the Christian desire for the ending of this world—is that God will utterly defeat evil, dealing with death and transforming the heavens and the earth into Paradise regained. Complete healing will replace the horrors of war. Tolkien's picture of the cosmos' conclusion is remarkably similar. His "Christian myth" is, as Colin Duriez relates, akin to the Norse myths from which the professor drew inspiration. But, as Duriez also notes, "Tolkien has, in place of the Twilight of the gods, suggestions of a Last Battle at the end of the ages...that is full of the Christian hope of the end of the world" (Duriez 59). Whether intentional or not, Tolkien's vision of his world's end times resounds with the same renewal as the Christian story. C.S. Kilby, who worked alongside Professor Tolkien to prepare his mythology for publication, concludes that Tolkien, as a devout Christian, could not leave his world under the effects of the Fall forever.

There is evidence that, had his story continued to its full and concluding end the ubiquitous evil of such as Morgoth and Sauron would have ceased. He intended a final glorious eventuality similar to the one described in the Book of Revelation with the true Telperion reappearing, the earth remade, the lands lying under the waves lifted

up, the Silmarils recovered, Eärendil returned to earth, the Two Trees rekindled in their original light and life-giving power, and the mountains of the Pelori leveled so that the light should go out over all the earth—yes, and the dead be raised and the original purposes of Eru executed (Kilby 64-65).

The Lord of the Rings points to the core of Christian eschatology. It points to God executing His original purposes, ushering in a new Heaven and a new Earth in the ultimate eucatastrophe.

Though Christian theology is foundational to Tolkien's work, *The Lord of the Rings* is subtle about voicing its Christian bent. One can read Tolkien's book without coming face-to-face with overt Christian teaching. This does not mean that its "consonan[ce] with Christian thought and belief" is entirely unintentional, however, nor is it a product of Christian critics' invention (Letters 355). In a 1958 letter, Tolkien asserts, "*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision" (Letters 288). Tolkien goes on in this letter to state that the Christian element fits naturally into the story as a product of his faith-filled upbringing. As his life grew atop the bedrock of faith, his writing could not help but rest on that same foundation. Ultimately, his work speaks on Christian themes more powerfully than Tolkien could speak directly, which is exactly why he wrote a myth, or fantasy story, rather than a series of essays about self-sacrifice, eschatology, and so on. In Verlyn Flieger's words, "For Tolkien, story is the most effective carrier of truth because it works with images rather than concepts" (Flieger 11). In the story, in the "inner consistency of reality" that his wordcraft forges, one discerns a framework of truths. Those who freely give their lives

find them again. Those who humble themselves are honored. Those who endure hardship taste otherworldly joy. Those who hope for a renewed world experience healing. And yes, stories that are not factual can be true. Whether one calls it fantasy, fairy story, or myth, *The Lord of the Rings* is just such a story; it looks beyond itself. In Tolkien's own words, "It is about God," and it is about choosing the Creator's way over the world's way (Letters 243). To a profound degree, it is about living the Christian way.

Works Cited

Carpenter, Humphrey, ed. *The Letters of J. R.R. Tolkien*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981.

Duriez, Colin. *The J.R.R. Tolkien Handbook*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998.

The NIV Study Bible. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995.

Tolkien, J.R.R. "On Fairy-Stories." *Folk & Fairy Tales*. Ed. Martin Hallett and Barbara Karasek. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1996.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995.