

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian Students

Presented by the
President of

Central Baptist
Theological Seminary
of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life’s urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today’s Christian students to become tomorrow’s Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

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The Christian and Fantastic Literature

Part Five

The Lord of the Rings

The explosive popularity of fantastic fiction probably owes more to the work and success of J. R. R. Tolkien than to that of any other writer. Before Tolkien, fantasy was rather an esoteric branch of literature. It had its loyal followers, but it was never quite respectable among true *literati*. Beginning with *The Lord of the Rings*, however, fantasy has become mainstream.

Tolkien put enormous effort into the creation of his fantastic world. He invented cultures, civilizations, languages, races and peoples, a mythology, and even a cosmogony. The background material for *The Lord of the Rings* fills several large volumes. That is why the story has a depth and texture rarely found in any fictional writing, let alone fantasy. Readers get the impression that they are treading on ground that fairly oozes with the past. Yet Tolkien manages to do all of this without resorting to the quirkiness and idiosyncrasies that often characterize fantasy.

Some Christians have expressed hesitation over Tolkien’s tale. They point out that one of the protagonists is a wizard, that Tolkien regularly uses magic in the story, and that the antagonists are truly diabolical characters. Sometimes they suggest that Tolkien’s universe, while obviously supernatural, seems to function without the benefit of a God.

Is this hesitation legitimate? Is Tolkien trying to sneak demon worship in through the back door? Is the effect of his work to subvert Christian values? Several observations help to answer this question.

Before those observations can be offered, however, one point must be emphasized. *The Lord of the Rings* as written by J. R. R. Tolkien is not the same work as *The Lord of the Rings* turned into cinema by Peter Jackson. While the two do share a title and certain superficial similarities of character and plot, the moral worlds that they depict are entirely different. What is said of Tolkien's work will often not apply to Jackson's. Therefore, nothing in this essay should be taken as a statement about Jackson's movies. Leaving aside Jackson's films, then, what factors need to be considered in order to evaluate Tolkien's epic?

First, in *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien depicts a moral universe. In Middle Earth, right is right and wrong is wrong. Virtues are uniformly praised and vices are uniformly condemned. Sin produces far-reaching consequences, judgment is necessary, redemption is possible, and sacrifice is essential. There is no moral confusion here. The world that Tolkien invents is morally identical to the real world.

Second, most of Tolkien's inventions are not magical, even though they are remarkable. Middle Earth is populated with hobbits, dwarves, dragons, ents, orcs, and trolls. None of these creatures exists in the real world, but none of them is really magical in Tolkien's story. They are strictly natural in their own settings.

This is not to suggest that all of Tolkien's inventions are natural, however. He creates both objects (the rings and the palantiri, for example) and persons (elves and wizards) that are supernatural within the world of the story. While these inventions are magical by the standards of Middle Earth, however, they do not fit the biblical definition of magic in the real world.

Indeed, Tolkien is very careful in the way that he handles magic in his story. He clearly distinguishes "magic" (Christians would say *miracle*) that comes from divine sources from "magic" that arises from "the deceits of the Enemy." For Tolkien, these are not at all the same thing. He never treats them as equal, and he never induces the reader to seek magical powers in the real world. No fair evaluation of *The Lord of the Rings* should fault it for the presence of "magic" in the tale.

Third, Tolkien's Middle Earth is under the government of a God, though He is only hinted at in *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings*. This God (who appears directly in *The Silmarillion*) is opposed by a diabolical figure and his servants (Morgoth and Sauron). There are angelic figures (the wizards) who may fall (Saruman). Middle Earth includes both an unfallen race (elves) and a fallen one (humans). None of this has to be regarded as anti-biblical or offensive to genuinely Christian sensibilities.

The Lord of the Rings is built upon a strong doctrine of Providence. God is in control. His purpose will be accomplished. Yet the freedom of His creatures is never abridged. They may (and some do) even oppose Him. Yet they may also seek to uphold His judgments, and therein lies the crux of Tolkien's narrative.

The Lord of the Rings is a tale of morality. It is an epic of virtues pitted against vices. The protagonists do not know how things are going to turn out, but they do know where to stand

within moral reality. Tolkien uses fantasy to its best advantage, abstracting and enlarging upon specific virtues and vices. This allows him to show the reader how a moral man ought to live. Tolkien does on a grand scale what Jotham does on a small scale with the “Fable of the Trees” (Jgs. 9:8-15).

The moral lessons of Middle Earth are manifold. The weak, acting with resolution and conviction, can oppose and overcome evil when it is strong. Evil cannot be fought with evil. Virtue, in order to triumph, requires genuine sacrifice. Even defeated evils may leave enduring scars.

These are not merely moral lessons, they are Christian lessons. They derive only from the Christian vision of reality. Tolkien’s purpose is to reinterpret the structures of Christian morality within an invented universe of fantastic creatures.

If we grant the assumptions of his world and accept his own *usus loquendi*, we will discover that Tolkien’s epic provides us with one of the greatest tools of moral teaching that has ever been authored outside of Scripture. It rightly deserves to be ranked along side of *Pilgrim’s Progress* or *Paradise Lost*, not only as a work of literature, but as a representative of the Christian world view. Far from frowning when our children read *The Lord of the Rings*, we ought to be reading it to them. ✕

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of Central Seminary’s professors, students, or alumni necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

Central Baptist Theological Seminary of Minneapolis | Contact Us
900 Forestview Ln N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 1-800-827-1043 | www.centraseminary.edu