



9-1-2006

The Gospel According to Tolkien: Visions of the Kingdom in Middle-Earth, by Ralph C. Wood

Jeny Sejdinaj

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce>

Recommended Citation

Sejdinaj, J. (2006). The Gospel According to Tolkien: Visions of the Kingdom in Middle-Earth, by Ralph C. Wood. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 10 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.1001122013>

This Book Review is brought to you for free with open access by the School of Education at Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for publication in *Journal of Catholic Education* by the journal's editorial board and has been published on the web by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information about Digital Commons, please contact digitalcommons@lmu.edu. To contact the editorial board of *Journal of Catholic Education*, please email CatholicEdJournal@lmu.edu.

drop necessary to help the Church move ahead with many issues affecting the priesthood. The book provides solid insight as well as poignant anecdotal snapshots of what it is really like to be a priest.

REFERENCES

- Hoge, D. R., & Wenger, J. E. (2003). *Evolving visions of the priesthood: Changes from Vatican II to the turn of the century*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.
- Paul VI. (1968). *Humanae vitae* [On the regulation of births]. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference.
- Vatican II Council. (1965). *Dignitatis humanae* [Declaration on religious freedom]. Washington, DC: National Catholic Welfare Conference.

Mary Louque was principal at Our Lady of the Rosary Catholic School in Greenville, SC.

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO TOLKIEN: VISIONS OF THE KINGDOM IN MIDDLE- EARTH

RALPH C. WOOD
WESTMINSTER JOHN KNOX PRESS, 2003
\$14.95, 224 pages

Reviewed by Jeny Sejdinaj

J. R. R. Tolkien, for those readers who are oblivious to the cinematic extravaganzas of the 21st century as well as the literary marvels of the 20th century, is the author of *The Lord of the Rings*, a fantasy tale written throughout the 1940s and published between 1954 and 1955. The printed work runs over 1,200 pages and is usually published in three volumes. Part of a larger collection of works that center around Middle-Earth, a world inhabited by elves, men, dwarves, wizards, hobbits, ents, orcs, and wargs, Tolkien constructs a creation story to rival Greek, Roman, or Norse mythology. Tolkien once said that he was building a mythology for Great Britain; it had been invaded so many times that it had never developed its own particular legends in this regard.

Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) takes place in a pre-Christian setting where the characters enter into a monumental struggle of good versus

evil. Tolkien was a devout Catholic, and although Middle-Earth contains no prescribed religion, it speaks volumes about Christian beliefs and themes. Exact figures are hard to come by, but estimates report that *The Lord of the Rings* has been translated into 25 languages and has sold over 50 million copies. Its popularity is stronger than ever with the recently released movies. The book has staying power and appeals to a broad range of people throughout many countries.

Wood (2003), in *The Gospel According to Tolkien*, examines how the book, and its surrounding mythology, is imbued with the messages of the Gospels and of Christian belief. If the reader does not have at least a working knowledge of *The Lord of the Rings*, it is likely that Wood's book will be of little interest. If, however, the reader has an understanding of *The Lord of the Rings*, or better yet, an interest in all things Tolkien, *The Gospel According to Tolkien* will have significance and possibly open a door to new complexities in the stories of Middle-Earth.

Wood uses the introduction to educate the reader regarding some of Tolkien's attitudes, beliefs, and vocabulary. Wood is careful to point out that *The Lord of the Rings* is not a Christian allegory, unlike C. S. Lewis's (1950/2004) *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Tolkien prefers fantasy to allegory because fantasy allows the reader to experience the tale in personal, diverse ways: "He wants us to discern likenesses and resemblances between the Ruling Ring and the nuclear bomb, for instance, but not to equate them" (Wood, 2003, p. 5).

To Tolkien, fantasies and fairy-stories strike deep truth because of their happy endings, which provide solace for the tragedy and sorrow of life. The joyful ending proceeds from a disastrous event, an event that produces deliverance.

Tolkien calls this saving mishap a *eucatastrophe*: a happy calamity that does not deny the awful reality of *dyscatastrophe*—of human wreck and ruin....Tolkien regards many of the world's myths and fairy-stories as forerunners and preparations of the Gospel—as fallible human attempts to tell the Story that only the triune God can tell perfectly. The Gospel is the ultimate fairy-story, Tolkien concludes, because it contains "the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe....There is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many skeptical men have accepted as true on its own merits....To reject it leads either to sadness or to wrath." (Wood, 2003, p. 8)

The eucatastrophe of *The Lord of the Rings* is the battle with Sauron that ends in his defeat, allowing the forces of good to usher in a new age for Middle-Earth, though at great cost. There is reward for suffering; there is life after earthly existence.

Wood organizes his text into five chapters, each approaching Tolkien's work from different elements of Christian faith: creation, evil, moral life, redeemed life, and consummation.

In the first chapter, Wood describes the formation of Tolkien's universe by Ilúvatar, the creator. The creation story, replete with angelic beings, pride, and downfall, is drawn from *The Silmarillion* (Tolkien, 1977) and other of Tolkien's writings. Wood combines the mythology with events from *The Lord of the Rings* as he discusses fate, doom, and death in light of pre-Christian and Christian philosophies. Death permeates Tolkien's book and gives it a sense of melancholy. Wood reminds us that "a melancholy air also infuses much of Scripture, and that Hebrew wisdom is built on an unflinching honesty about death" (2003, p. 17). Death is not only associated with creatures who walk the earth; it is also evident in the destruction of nature brought about by corrupting evil. Despite the sadness of loss, hopefulness does wind its way through Tolkien's tale, primarily in the characters of the hobbits. Their joy of life, love of food and drink and a good pipe, and preference to give rather than receive, allow them to be representative of true goodness. They are also smaller than men, a physical trait Tolkien uses to emphasize that greatness can be found in small places.

Wood spends a number of pages on the importance of words in Tolkien's work. "Because God himself is understood fundamentally as the Word, Tolkien regards speech as our most fundamental gift, the one thing that distinguishes us as uniquely human creatures made in the image of God" (2003, p. 32). Tolkien is a master of ancient languages and the creator of some himself. He feels that the richness of old tongues has been lost in our modern linguistics. Words that Tolkien invents carry with them resonances of their origins. "Sauros is the Greek word for 'lizard.' The Satanic figure called Sauron is thus linked to a cold-blooded reptilian, as in the Garden of Eden" (Wood, 2003, p. 36).

The second chapter of Wood's book focuses on evil. The Ruling Ring and its evil influence play a primary role in Tolkien's story. Wood gives a brief account of its history, including the origin of Gollum. Here is the Cain and Abel story, in hobbit form, with Sméagol killing Déagol to get the ring. The ring imparts longevity to its bearer, and Sméagol transforms over time into a pitiable creature.

Tolkien understands the odd danger posed by virtue cut off from the Good....Our very strengths and assets—whether intelligence or bravery, diligence or loyalty or beauty, but especially righteousness—may dispose us either to scorn those who lack such virtues, or else to employ our gifts for our own selfish ends. (Wood, 2003, p. 62)

In the third chapter of his book, Wood discusses the four cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. Gandalf is the embodiment of wisdom, as Jesus is a “rabbi, a wisdom teacher” (2003, p. 78). Wisdom is akin to the classical virtue of prudence. Aragorn is an able ruler because he possesses wisdom and prudence, here described as the main virtue because it involves truth and the ability to act on it and allows for moral growth. Wood describes the characters as having acquired both “dignity and sanctity in their faithfulness to each other, to the Quest, even to Ilúvatar himself” (p. 85). Gandalf is able to leave his companions because they are able to live virtuously without his help, just as Jesus left his disciples.

Justice is seen as a key to social existence, demanding that we provide strangers with their due. The members of the Company are often blessed with the hospitality of those they meet on their way, as “Jesus repeatedly relies on the hospitality of others, and he commends it, in Matthew 25, as a key distinction between those who have served him and those who have not” (Wood, 2003, p. 89). Justice is also seen in the arena of war, but Faramir finds no pleasure in war; he sees it only for defense of freedom and civility. Justice is also seen in mercy: Characters who have done wrong and deserve to be punished end up receiving mercy, and often their actions result in good things.

Chapter 5 shows how the three theological virtues—faith, hope, and love—are expressed in the quest of the Company: “Faith in the trust that forms friendship, hope in the vision of a future where Good will finally prevail, and love in the forgiveness that is human possibility only because it is first a divine reality” (Wood, 2003, p. 118).

The members of the Fellowship have faith in each other, but beyond that is the faith that seems to interject on their behalf. The hobbits find themselves crying to Elbereth, an angelic figure from mythology. Sam’s devotion to Galadriel is also a turn of faith, and it is “mystical and Marian, as Tolkien himself confessed” (p. 124).

Aragorn is the embodiment of hope; he is the king whose return has been awaited. His rule is just and good, and when his life is at an end his farewell to Arwen is not one of despair but of hope: “Behold! we are not bound forever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory” (as cited in Wood, 2003, p. 143). Hope is the force that drives Sam at the end of the story. He ruminates on the old tales and decides that the real heroes struggle without being assured victory. They struggle because they hope.

Love is evidenced not in a romantic form, but in the friendship of the Company. Wood refers to C. S. Lewis in writing, “Friendship is the one love that is not diminished when it is divided” (2003, p. 126). The Company is a community of friendship, love, and solidarity. Wood quotes St. Paul: “If one member suffers all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice

together (I Cor. 12:26)” (p. 129), in reference to the entry of the Company into Lórien. If one must be blindfolded, they all will be blindfolded. Frodo finds the best in Gollum by calling forth the good and not the bad, similar to God’s love, which makes all people lovable.

The heart of God’s love is forgiveness. He shows his love for us even though we are sinners. The moral and religious center of the story, argues Wood, is in the speech Gandalf gives Frodo regarding the pity Bilbo showed to Gollum. “The pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many,” and “Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them?” (as cited in Wood, 2003, p. 150). These statements echo “‘Judge not, that you be judged’ (Matt 7:1)” (p. 151).

In the final chapter of the book, Wood poses the question: “Why, then is the history of Middle-Earth not caught in an endlessly downward spiral toward final defeat and death?” (2003, p. 156). He finds the answer in another of Tolkien’s works, “The Debate of Finrod and Andreth” (Tolkien & Tolkien, 1993). The debate brings forth the conclusion that the “Old Hope” of ancient times is “that Ilúvatar himself should take on earthly life” (Wood, 2003, p. 161). Here is Tolkien’s prophecy of the incarnation of God in Middle-Earth.

Wood concludes that the Company of *The Lord of the Rings* answers the call of the Gospel, the call to give up everything in order that others might find the treasure of the Kingdom.

The Gospel According to Tolkien provides insights into Tolkien’s works on a Christian level. While Wood’s passion for the Catholic interpretation of Tolkien’s work is evident, it is hardly original. Tolkien himself called *The Lord of the Rings* a “fundamentally religious and Catholic book” (as cited in Wood, 2003, p. 9); it is reasonable to expect research and interpretation in this area. Within the past 3 years, a number of books on this subject have been published, as well as new editions of several originally published in the 1980s. These books address the need for new fans of Tolkien—encouraged by the films—to find an explanation for the powerful emotion the story awakens. Christian morals and messages resonate deep within many hearts. Followers of Christian faith who read Tolkien can recognize the connections between the two. *The Gospel According to Tolkien* is one book of many that provides a guide to those who need to see in print what they already know in their hearts.

REFERENCES

- Lewis, C. S. (2004). *The chronicles of Narnia*. New York: HarperCollins. (Original work published 1950)
- Tolkien, J. R. R. (1954). *The lord of the rings*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. (1977). *The silmarillion*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

- Tolkien, J. R. R., & Tolkien, C. (1993). *The history of Middle-Earth: Vol. 10 Morgoth's Ring*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Wood, R. C. (2003). *The Gospel according to Tolkien: Visions of the kingdom in Middle-Earth*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

Jeny Sejdinaj is principal at St. Adalbert School in South Bend, IN.

SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL CHANGE: CREATING SETTINGS TO IMPROVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

CLAUDE GOLDENBERG
TEACHERS COLLEGE PRESS, 2004
\$25.95, 224 pages

Reviewed by Ruth Tinsley

Educators are constantly looking for ways to improve teaching and learning in their classrooms. Frequently, the teacher works alone to implement improvements. Not knowing where to turn and feelings of inadequacy are two reasons that teachers do not seek help that is often available. In *Successful School Change* (Goldenberg, 2004), the search for answers is found in the bridging of classroom, school, and home. For effective change to take place, "Schools, as a whole, not simply individual classrooms must become settings for productive teaching and learning" (p. 23). Although the story is set in a bilingual school, the story of how positive change can happen within a school is universal. Educators who read the book can find the approach helpful to almost any situation.

Successful School Change is Goldenberg's research-based book that follows one school's journey on the path to change. Freeman Elementary School is located in the Lawson School District in Southern California. (The names of both the school and the district are pseudonyms.) The community is comprised of both illegal and legal immigrants who work in the service industry. No longer the model for academic progress, the school struggles with the burden of language barriers. Ninety-percent of the students attending Freeman are Latino, and the drastic change in the socio-economic situation taking place in the community has teachers witnessing the decline of the once prominent school. Jessie Sullivan, a new principal, becomes the third principal in 3