

Introduction



The Lord of the Rings!

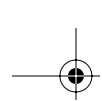
Frodo Baggins, at the council of Elrond, saying, "I will take the Ring, though I do not know the way."

Gandalf the Grey sliding into the abyss, crying, "Fly, you fools!"

Sam Gamgee, a gardener from the Shire, "turning into a creature of stone and steel, which neither weariness, nor despair, nor endless, barren miles could subdue."

The mere recollection of these phrases can move me to tears. I have been reading this tale since I was eleven years old, taking it from my shelf every year or so and returning to Middle-earth, drinking its virtues, pulling sustenance from it the way a tree draws earth with its roots. I never grow weary of it. As I get older and learn more of what sort of person I am and continue sojourning in the rich soil of the Shire and the high tower of Minas





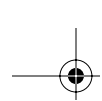
Tirith, I discover that many of my notions of what is good and right and noble in this world have their source in that one.

Visiting Middle-earth is like returning home, a blessing made all the more poignant the farther I feel from my real one. Some of my oldest friends live there, and I learn more about them every time we meet. Some, like Sam, are simple and accessible, and yet their deeds are awe-inspiring. Others, like Tom Bombadil or Treebeard, only grow more mysterious and inscrutable. It is a vast, carefully detailed world, wondrous evidence of the capacity for imagination with which our Creator has endowed us. Tolkien delights in describing every flower and every stand of trees, every curve of the river and every turn of the trail. His delight is so infectious that whenever I am hiking through some corner of this world that is still worthy to be called “unspoiled,” much of what I see and hear and smell reminds me of Ithilien, Lothlórien or the Shire, as if I had actually been there and was now returning.

In Middle-earth I have found a training ground, a place where I can apprentice to those whose gifts of charity, wisdom, kindness, mercy, love and faithfulness far surpass my own. Soon after reading *The Lord of the Rings* for the first time, I was in a Sunday school class in which we read a section of the Old Testament. I made the observation that it sounded a lot like Tolkien. My Sunday school teacher gently corrected me. “No, Mark,” she said, “Tolkien sounds a lot like the Bible.”

This is not incidental. Tolkien was a devout Catholic from early childhood. He believed that his history of Middle-earth was on some level essentially true, that he was not so much inventing





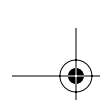
it as discovering it. I am not suggesting it was inspired in the biblical sense of the word, but I do believe that God had a hand in writing it, working through the circumstances of Tolkien's life, speaking to him through his intuition, endowing him with wisdom to understand the intricacies of the plot of the ongoing story called Creation.

C. S. Lewis credited a late-night conversation with Tolkien and another friend as being the crux of his conversion from a guarded theism to an enthusiastic Christianity. The essential insight he gained from them was that myths are not by definition lies. The story of Christ is a "true myth, a myth that works on us in the same way as the others, but a myth that *really happened*." Part of Tolkien's argument went like this:

We have come from God, and inevitably the myths woven by us, though they contain error, will also reflect a splintered fragment of the true light, the eternal truth that is with God. Indeed, only by myth-making, only by becoming a "sub-creator" and inventing stories, can Man aspire to the state of perfection that he knew before the Fall. Our myths may be misguided, but they steer however shakily towards the true harbour. (reconstructed by Humphrey Carpenter in *J. R. R. Tolkien*, p. 151)

Tolkien never preaches. He is not offering a sermon but telling a story. He gives the characters freedom to take on a life of their own, to make their own decisions as it were. He hated allegory of any kind but made a distinction between allegory and applicability. In his foreword to the Ballantine paperback edition (I use the





ninety-fifth printing for references throughout, with occasional references to the eleventh printing of *The Silmarillion*, citing volume number and page) he writes, “The one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author.”

Here then is my humble attempt at searching out some of the applicabilities of *The Lord of the Rings*. Middle-earth is so self-contained, so fully and minutely realized, and yet at the same time so removed from what we fondly refer to as the real world, that we may learn more easily from it than by studying the convoluted facts of our own history. Along with *The Silmarillion*, which details the cosmology, mythology and tragedy leading up to the War of the Rings (as well as volumes of Lost and Unfinished Tales), we can see the beginning, the middle and the end—a complete story. Again, Tolkien’s work copies the Bible in this large scope. While it can never supplant the Bible, it may do its part to supplement it, so that we see again, from a different perspective, the same essential and eternal truths.

