



The Messiah Comes to Middle-Earth: Images of Christ's Threefold Office in The Lord of the Rings

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What *The Lord of the Rings* Teaches Us About Christ

The Messiah Comes to Middle-Earth is the first book to emerge from the inaugural Hansen Lectureship Series at Wheaton College's Marion E. Wade Center. Written by Wheaton College president Philip Ryken, the book explores how *The Lord of the Rings* helps us grasp the significance of Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

Since at least the fourth century, beginning with church historian Eusebius of Caesarea, the threefold office of Christ as prophet, priest, and king has served as one way for Christians to comprehend the gospel narrative. In this book, Ryken mines the riches of J. R. R. Tolkien's theological imagination, hearing echoes of the one who is the true prophet, priest, and king in the characters (Gandalf, Frodo, and Aragorn) of Tolkien's classic work.

This literary reflection accomplishes the following:

- Provides new understanding of themes in Tolkien's classic work
- Helps Christians understand the threefold office of Christ in a new way
- Adds to the Wade Center's major research collection on seven prominent British authors
- Considers what the threefold office means for Ryken's service as a college president as well as for the calling of all Christians
- Includes responses to Ryken's essays from Wheaton College faculty

"Phil Ryken not only draws upon a wealth of Tolkien scholarship, he adds some marvelous insights of his own into the spiritual and theological dynamics at play in Middle-earth," writes Richard J. Mouw, president emeritus and professor of faith and public life at Fuller Theological Seminary. "He [then] uses all of this to provide us with much wisdom about the kind of leadership that can honor the prophetic, priestly, and kingly work of Jesus Christ."



Philip Ryken, author of *The Messiah Comes to Middle-Earth: Images of Christ's Threefold Office in The Lord of the Rings*
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Philip Ryken (DPhil, Oxford) is the eighth president of Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois. He formerly served as the senior pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. He is the author or editor of more than forty books including *The Message of Salvation*, *Art for God's Sake*, and *When Trouble Comes*.

Leadership Lessons from *The Lord of the Rings*

Philip Ryken, president of Wheaton College in Illinois, pens the inaugural book of the Hansen Lectureship Series with a look at how the threefold office of Christ appears in J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings. The Hansen Lectureship takes place at Wheaton College's Marion E. Wade Center, a major research collection of materials by and about seven British authors, and features lectures by Wheaton College faculty on Wade Center authors such as C. S. Lewis and Tolkien. In this interview, Ryken explains how he came to this project and the leadership lessons that can be learned through considering Christ as prophet, priest, and king.

How did you develop the topic of this book?

Philip Ryken: This book arose out of a longer-term project to reflect on the implications of the ministry of Christ as prophet, priest, and king – and also the calling of every believer to prophetic, priestly, and kingdom ministry – for pastoral and presidential leadership. I wrote my “Faith and Learning” paper for Wheaton College on this subject, integrating Christian faith and theology with my calling as a pastor and a college president. When the Wade Center asked me to present a series of lectures presenting one of my scholarly interests in conversation with one of the Wade Center authors, I thought immediately of bringing this project into conversation with Lewis, Tolkien, and others.

What made *The Lord of the Rings* a good fit for developing this theme?

Ryken: The difficulty was that while it was easy to think of conversation partners on kingship (Aslan, Dorothy Sayers on “The Man Born to be King,” etc.), and while I considered using G. K. Chesterton’s Father Brown mysteries as a way into the theme of priesthood, it was harder to think of really suitable literary works on the prophetic dimension of Christ’s ministry. Upon reflection, I could see that *The Lord of the Rings* would give me a chance to discuss all three offices: Gandalf is a prophet, Frodo is a priest, and Aragorn is a king. This proved to be even richer with possibilities than I anticipated. Along the way I discovered a short, unpublished essay on the threefold office of Christ in Middle-earth – one that Tolkien himself had read and commented on. And the biblical and theological connections with all three of Middle-earth’s protagonists proved to be even more extensive than anticipated.

How does this book contribute leadership lessons as well as to the scholarly work of the Wade Center?

Broadly speaking, the most important need this book fulfills is to present a theology of leadership that really is a theology and that is grounded in highly specific ways in the person and work of Jesus Christ. This is not just servant leadership; it is the complete work of Christ in all its royal, prophetic, and priestly dimensions. From a scholarly standpoint, *The*

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Q & A

Messiah Comes to Middle-Earth is a legitimate work of Tolkien scholarship, offering a fresh way of reading *The Lord of the Rings* and interacting with Tolkien's letters as well as his famous literature. It also has a nice theological side to it in the field of leadership, where the thinking tends to be a little thin, lacking theological depth.