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Professor John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892-1973), the author of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

The Moral Mythmaker: The Creative Theology of J. R. R. Tolkien

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Shortly after the theatrical release of The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring in December 2001, Richard Neitzel Holzappel encouraged me to write an article regarding The Lord of the Rings and its application to the Latter-day Saint classroom. While I believe that the proper atmosphere for teaching literature is in the literature classroom, I am keenly aware of the popularity of the works of J. R. R. Tolkien and their potential applicability to the teaching of gospel principles. I have observed, however, that most of my students are not clear as to why they enjoy the stories of Middle Earth and what draws them into this particular world of fantasy. My remarks are intended to introduce teachers to some of the reasons behind the natural gravitation of their students to Tolkien's works. The youth of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are sensitive to true principles, and they will find the truths of eternity in the writings of good people. Not every man who has written his mind or has had his works published or has been lauded by the academics of the world has been a good man. John Ronald Reuel Tolkein, however, is one of the best. As to whether every teacher in the Church Educational System ought to read The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings, I will say no more than to repeat my oft-quoted advice with a bit of a wry smile: "A man is not truly educated until he has."

A Personal Introduction

Thirty-five years ago, shortly after I returned home from a mission to southern Mexico, a friend introduced me to the writings of J. R. R. Tolkien. I began with *The Hobbit*, the so-called prequel to *The Lord of the Rings*. Ten days later, I put down *The Return of the King*, hungering

for more, and there was no more. I scoured the bookstores for Tolkien's poetry and prose and joyfully found *The Tolkien Reader*, *Smith of Wooten Major*, *Farmer Giles of Ham*, *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*, and the lovely *Leaf by Niggle*. Yet of hobbits and elves I could learn nothing more. As a result of what I considered to be a literary dearth, I returned to the original four volumes and devoured them again and again. Each reading revealed aspects of the narrative that I had missed; each reading increased the hunger for whatever it was that Tolkien's works had addicted me to. I am not sure that I could have articulated what it was I desired; I knew only that the desire within me was waiting impatiently to be satisfied.

In an act of desperation, I began to do what I would now term a "survey of literature." I perused the periodical indices, subsequently making copies of every news article I could find on Tolkien and his creations. In the process, I learned of Tolkien's affection for the writings of George MacDonald, William Morris, H. Rider Haggard, and other nineteenth-century fantasists. In short order, I discovered for myself that my tastes ran in the same channel. My personal library began to grow. I learned of Tolkien's intimate friendships with C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and the other Oxford "Inklings," as they styled themselves. My reading of *The Chronicles of Narnia* and the *Peregrina* trilogy began a lifelong love of Lewis's narrative gift and led me ultimately to his outwardly theological writings at which I was awestruck. Williams's *The Place of the Lion* and *The Greater Trumps* left me spellbound, and I could not desist until I had acquired all of Tolkien's scant corpus of published works. My bookshelves smiled more and more deeply at the discovery of each of these literary and personal companions that graced Tolkien's life.

As I probed into his history, I became aware of his academic background. I learned of his love of the English language in all of its permutations, his native gift for language acquisition, and his scholarly grasp of the historical development of language. I had long been aware of and fascinated with the runic systems of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, together with the Elvish scripts in all their varieties. I began to realize that these, along with the various invented linguistic pieces of poetry and dialogue, were not merely creative frosting but were part of a vast, seamless panorama from which the stories had been taken. The more I became aware of his professional pursuits, the more I became intrigued by the obvious connection between the real world and the world of Middle Earth. I sensed that no true appreciation of what Tolkien had accomplished in his writings could ever materialize

unless I understood the fountain from which their creation sprang. So compellingly did this realization strike me that I changed majors at the time I began my master's program. I had been a Spanish major; I would now delve into the mysteries of English language and linguistics. A year after I completed this advanced degree, I mourned the death of John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, a man whom I had never met but whom I had come to know intimately.

Tolkien the Scholar¹

Tolkien was born 3 January 1892 in Bloemfontein, South Africa, to Arthur and Mabel Tolkien, emigrants from Birmingham, England. His father worked as the bank manager for the Bank of Africa in the Orange Free State. By February 1896, however, Ronald Tolkien and his younger brother Hillary were fatherless. Their mother returned to England with her sons in the summer of 1896 but died of diabetes eight years later. The two boys were raised by relatives under the guidance of a local parish priest, their mother having been received into the Catholic Church four years before her death. John Ronald followed a course of study at King Edward's School, where he clearly manifested an aptitude for languages, first with Latin and Greek and later with Welsh, French, and German. Although Tolkien's linguistic gift helped him learn ancient and foreign languages, his mind gravitated toward the reasons why languages were as they were—how and why they differed. He studied philology and in due time discovered Anglo-Saxon and the epic *Beowulf* and from thence to Middle English and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. He then turned to Old Norse and the *Elder* and *Younger Eddas*, the literary treasures of Iceland. In his final year at King Edward's, he discovered the *Kalavala*, the principal depository of Finnish mythology.

His love of language motivated him to create languages of his own, sometimes in collaboration with cousins and friends, using English, Greek, French, Spanish, and Latin elements as the building blocks for the phonetics and vocabulary. His first serious language invention, however, evolved from his study of Gothic, the sole survivor of the East Germanic family of languages. He created words and phrases in the Gothic manner and then proposed etymologies that would link them to extant vocabulary or to languages of more ancient date. In 1912, he abandoned Gothic as the catalyst and turned to Finnish, from which would develop the family of Elvish languages with which most readers of Tolkien's works have become familiar, Quenya in particular. A variety of language permutations would develop as Tolkien

incorporated linguistic principles from Welsh and other exotic languages, producing Sindarin, Laiquendi, Moriquendi, and others—nearly forty languages in all.

In December 1910, Tolkien was awarded an Open Classical Exhibition to Exeter College at Oxford University and matriculated there in the fall of 1911. By 1913, he was preparing for his degree in the Honours School of English Language and Literature at Exeter. As he progressed in his studies of Anglo-Saxon, he read Cynewulf's *Crist*, two lines of which struck him forcefully:

Eala Earendel engla beorhtast
Ofer middangeard monnum sended
 Hail Earendel, brightest of angels
 Above the middle-earth sent unto men

From this meager beginning would derive a series of poems and stories that would serve as the foundation of the mythology of Middle Earth: *The Book of Lost Tales*.

Tolkien graduated from Exeter with first class honors in the summer of 1915 and was immediately commissioned in the Lancashire Fusiliers and sent to France during the First World War. He spent almost all of 1917 convalescing in England from "trench fever" with little more to do than to write *The Book of Lost Tales*. In November of 1918, he returned to Oxford University to serve on the staff responsible for publishing the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a ten-volume work documenting the historical development of the English language from its roots to the present. In 1920, he accepted an appointment at Leeds University as reader in English language and in 1924 was elected professor of English language at the same institution. In the summer of 1925, Tolkien was invited to return to Oxford as the Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon. During his tenure at Oxford, Tolkien wrote *The Hobbit*, an instant literary success published in 1937. Eight years later, he was elected Merton Professor of English Language and Literature at Oxford, a chair that he held until his retirement in 1959. While at Merton, Tolkien published *The Lord of the Rings*.

Tolkien the Mythmaker

The Lord of the Rings must be seen as part of the vast panorama devised by Tolkien twenty years before *The Hobbit* was published. As Professor Tolkien clearly states in his foreword to *The Lord of the Rings*, "This tale grew in the telling, until it became a history of the

Great War of the Ring and included many glimpses of the yet more ancient history that preceded it. It was begun soon after *The Hobbit* was written and before its publication in 1937; but I did not go on with this sequel, for I wished first to complete and set in order the mythology and legends of the Elder Days, which had then been taking shape for some years. I desired to do this for my own satisfaction, and I had little hope that other people would be interested in this work, especially since it was primarily linguistic in inspiration and was begun in order to provide the necessary background of ‘history’ for Elvish tongues.”²

Tolkien’s narrative references to the “ancient history” are not mere literary posing for rhetorical effect. In a letter to W. H. Auden, Tolkien addressed the issue directly. After referring to his particular linguistic tastes, Tolkien writes: “All this only as background to the stories, though languages and names are for me inextricable from the stories. They are and were so to speak an attempt to give a background or a world in which my expressions of linguistic taste could have a function. The stories were comparatively late in coming.”³

When the stories did come, they came with an underlying purpose, far grander than the creation of a world where his languages might be spoken. In a letter to Milton Waldman, Tolkien confesses the great design:

Do not laugh! But once upon a time (my crest has long since fallen) I had in mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story—the larger founded on the lesser in contact with the earth, the lesser drawing splendour from the vast backcloths—which I could dedicate simply to: to England; to my country. It should possess the tone and quality that I desired, somewhat cool and clear, be redolent of our “air” (the clime and soil of the North West, meaning Britain and the hither parts of Europe: not Italy or the Aegean, still less the East), and, while possessing (if I could achieve it) the fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic (though it is rarely found in genuine ancient Celtic things), it should be “high,” purged of the gross, and fit for the more adult mind of a land long now steeped in poetry. I would draw some of the great tales in fullness, and leave many only placed in the scheme, and sketched. The cycles should be linked to a majestic whole, and yet leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama. Absurd.⁴

This letter was drafted in 1951, three years before the first publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, and yet Tolkien already had in hand much of what he had described to Waldman. *The Book of Lost Tales*,

begun while Tolkien was yet an undergraduate at Oxford University, recounted the history of Middle Earth during the First and Second Ages of the world, vast periods of time carefully chronicled in prose and poetry. Christopher Tolkien, J. R. R. Tolkien's son and literary executor, has, during the past thirty years, brought to light this enormous historical backdrop of which *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* were eventually made part. *The Silmarillion*, *The Book of Lost Tales*, *The Lays of Beleriand*, *The Shaping of Middle Earth*, *The Lost Road*, and *The War of the Jewels*, among others, reveal with their grandeur of scope why Tolkien's stories regarding the War of the Ring have verisimilitude. For an accurate depiction of the grueling process and the sometimes debilitating frustration that J. R. R. Tolkien suffered during the creation of this English mythology, the reader is directed to Tolkien's wonderful short story "Leaf by Niggle."⁵

Tolkien the Moralist

At the heart of every writer there is a teacher, a part of the author's soul that is compelled to tell a story with a moral. Some are more blatant about the didactic act than others, but the instruction is delivered just the same. This is particularly true when the writer is fundamentally ethical—one who has a theological or religious fountain from which his or her writing flows. The degree to which a writer bares his or her soul varies, of course, but to illustrate the subtlety of technique, I turn to two of the writers I discovered for myself shortly after I came in contact with Tolkien's works: C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams. The titles of Charles Williams's seven novels clearly indicate the theological bent the author brought to his writing: *The Place of the Lion*, *All Hallow's Eve*, *Descent into Hell*, *Shadows of Ecstasy*, *Many Dimensions*, *War in Heaven*, and *The Greater Trumps*. There is no obfuscating the religious aspects of the stories with allegory; the ideas are plain and clear-cut. On the other hand, though deeply religious, many of the fictional works of C. S. Lewis are less aggressive theologically. *The Chronicles of Narnia* and the *Perelandra* trilogy, for example, have religious icons depicted, but they are generally far more allegorically represented: Aslan and Ransom as Christ figures, heavily charged names for characters, and so forth. If Williams wears his religion on his shirt cuff, Lewis has his farther up the sleeve. Tolkien, however, is far more oblique—close to his vest, to continue the analogy.

Before the publication of *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* in 1981, debates raged over the religiosity of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. The waybread of the elves was seen by some to be the Catholic

Eucharist; Galadriel as Mother Mary; Bilbo, Frodo, and Sam as the bearers of the Cross, either as Christ figures or Cyreneans; and so forth. Other fans and scholars dismissed the whole discussion as nonsense—that no overtly religious imagery and themes existed in Tolkien’s works. Tolkien’s letters, however, demonstrate that both extremes were in error. In a letter to Robert Murray, a Jesuit priest who had written him regarding Catholic elements in the trilogy, Tolkien wrote:

I think I know exactly what you mean by the order of Grace; and of course by your references to Our Lady, upon which all my own small perception of beauty both in majesty and simplicity is founded. *The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like “religion,” to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism. However that is very clumsily put, and sounds more self-important than I feel. For as a matter of fact, I have consciously planned very little.⁶

In a letter written to Deborah Webster in October of 1958 in which she had apparently asked for some pertinent personal facts, Tolkien somewhat clarifies his position on religion in the stories after addressing the influence of language on his writings:

And there are a few basic facts, which however drily expressed, are really significant. For instance I was born in 1892 and lived for my early years in “the Shire” in a pre-mechanical age. Or more important, I am a Christian (which can be deduced from my stories), and in fact a Roman Catholic. The latter “fact” perhaps cannot be deduced; though one critic (by letter) asserted that the invocations of Elbereth, and the character of Galadriel as directly described (or through the words of Gimli and Sam) were clearly related to Catholic devotion to Mary. Another saw in waybread (lembas) = viaticum and the reference to its feeding the *will* (vol. III, p. 213) and being more potent when fasting, a derivation from the Eucharist. (That is: far greater things may colour the mind in dealing with the lesser things of a fairy story).⁷

In a subsequent letter to Mrs. Ruth Austin, Tolkien issues a caveat in his amiable and kind-hearted way: “I was particularly interested in your remarks about Galadriel. . . . I think it is true that I owe much of this character to Christian and Catholic teaching and imagination about Mary, but actually Galadriel was a penitent: in her youth a leader in the rebellion against the Valar (the angelic guardians). At the end of

the First Age she proudly refused forgiveness or permission to return. She was pardoned because of her resistance to the final and overwhelming temptation to take the Ring for herself.”⁸

The temptation to interpret *The Lord of the Rings* is difficult to resist, but Tolkien warns the reader from the very beginning:

As for any inner meaning or “message”, it has in the intention of the author none. It is neither allegorical nor topical. As the story grew it put down roots (into the past) and threw out unexpected branches; but its main theme was settled from the outset by the inevitable choice of the Ring as the link between it and *The Hobbit*. . . . Other arrangements could be devised according to the tastes or views of those who like allegory or topical reference. But I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse “applicability” with “allegory”; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author.⁹

Therefore, though Tolkien’s story line and narrative are naturally shaped by his religious sentiments as a Roman Catholic, one does not need to be a Catholic or even a Christian to thoroughly enjoy his works. Is the waybread of the elves the Eucharist (or sacrament)? Yes and no. It is like saying that soil, air, and moisture equal the lilies of the field. While it may be biologically true, asserting the fact reduces the description to mere chemistry and says nothing of the life of the flowers nor of the beauty perceived by the travelers as they pass the field. If we are to find morality in Tolkien’s writings, we must look deeper, avoiding facile interpretations along the way. In the space that remains, I will briefly address three elements that will serve as keys to understanding: first, the manner in which the stories were told; second, the importance of light and darkness; and finally, the contrast between destiny and free will.

On Fairy Tales¹⁰

Most of the early criticism of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* came as the result of misunderstanding. Reviewers attempted to place Tolkien’s works in the same category as contemporary novels, not realizing that his models were nineteenth century rather than twentieth century.

Robley Evans was one of the few early critics who perceived precisely what Tolkien was about: “Unlike writers of science fiction, Tolkien relies upon the literary traditions of the past as well as upon his

imagination as the sources for his fantasy. He does not wish to break with Western culture or with the Romantic tradition that knowledge gives us power to change the world for the better. The imagination has enriched us in the past; it can continue to do so, not by throwing out our inheritance but by building upon it, and especially upon its familiar and eternally meaningful myths, symbols and dreams."¹¹

Paul Kocher, too, acquired an early insight into Tolkien's style and, contrary to other critics, lauded Tolkien's facility rather than decried it: "Tolkien's real mastery as a writer, though, consists in his power to establish for each individual race a personality that is unmistakably its own. A dwarf is as different from an elf as an ent from a hobbit, and all from a man and from one another. Further, each race has not only its gifts but also its private tragedy, which it must try to overcome as best it can. And it must work out its own often difficult way of living with its peers. All this imparts great variety and drama to the epic within the broader movement of events."¹²

C. S. Lewis is even more to the point in his review: "Much that in a realistic work would be done by 'character delineation' is here done simply by making the character an elf, a dwarf, or a hobbit. The imagined beings have their insides on the outside; they are visible souls."¹³

Max Lüthi in his little book, *On the Nature of Fairy Tales*, clarifies the stylistics associated with the traditional fairy tale and, by so doing, describes in large measure Tolkien's manner of telling his stories: "In the fairy tale, feelings and relationships are externalized, sometimes in a manner which for us is quite peculiar. . . . The steady progression of the action, the dispensing with a detailed portrayal of the background or the characters, in the predilection for everything clearly formed (in colors as well as in shape), the tendency toward extremes and contrasts, toward metals and minerals, cities, castles, rooms, boxes, rings, and swords, and the tendency to make feelings and relationships congeal into objects, so to speak, and thus become outwardly visible—all these things give the fairy tale definiteness, firmness, and clarity. The fairy tale bestows on its hearer, without him being aware of it, something of its unaffected precision and brilliance."¹⁴

That Tolkien was clearly utilizing the fairy tale as his model for telling the stories of Middle Earth is easily discerned through his letters to readers. To Naomi Mitchison he wrote the following of the elves: "If I were pressed to rationalize, I would say that they represent really Men with greatly enhanced aesthetic and creative faculties, greater beauty and longer life, and nobility."¹⁵

To Michael Straight he provided this insight: “Of course, in fact exterior to my story, Elves and Men are just different aspects of the Humane, and represent the problem of Death as seen by a finite but willing and self-conscious person. . . . The Elves represent, as it were, the artistic, aesthetic, and purely scientific aspects of the Humane nature raised to a higher level than is actually seen in Men.”¹⁶

Tolkien describes the hobbits in related terms in a letter to Milton Waldman: “The Hobbits are, of course, really meant to be a branch of the specifically *human* race (not Elves or Dwarves)—hence the two kinds can dwell together (as at Bree), and are called just the Big Folk and Little Folk. They are entirely without non-human powers, but are represented as being more in touch with ‘nature’ (the soil and other living things, plants and animals), and abnormally, for humans, free from ambition or greed of wealth. They are made *small* (little more than half human stature, but dwindling as the years pass) partly to exhibit the pettiness of man, plain unimaginative parochial man—though not with either the smallness or the savageness of Swift, and mostly to show up, in creatures of very small physical power, the amazing and unexpected heroism of ordinary man ‘at a pinch.’”¹⁷

The external devices used to distinguish races and individuals are legion and can be found in every aspect of the narrative, including the nature of dialogue, the development and uses of racial scripts, and the phonological and grammatical differences among the languages of all the speaking creatures of Middle Earth.¹⁸ These are in association with the obvious racial preferences exhibited toward nature, light, history, art, and wealth that almost every reader senses as he or she reads the books.

Light and Dark

Tolkien’s use of light and dark is so patently obvious in the text of his books that it is almost embarrassing to mention the subject. I do so, however, without trepidation, knowing that the first blush is not always the best, nor the most revealing. Anyone who is familiar with the volumes published by Christopher Tolkien after his father’s death is unavoidably aware of how profoundly the concept nourishes the overall creation of Middle Earth. A few examples gleaned from *The Silmarillion* should whet the appetite.

The elves are divided into classes of families dependent upon how far to the West they migrated after having been awakened at the waters of Cuivienen in the uttermost East. The Valar, the gods of Tolkien’s mythology, invited the elves to join them in Aman. Some were

frightened by Melkor and would not answer the call. They became known, along with others, as the Moriquendi—literally, the Dark Elves. Those who made their way across the wide expanse of Middle Earth to the Great Sea, and from thence to Aman, the glorious city of the Valar, became known as the Calaquendi—literally, the Light Elves. Those who hesitated at the Great Sea and would not cross were the Sindar, or Grey-elves. The Woodland Elves became known as the Laiquendi, or Green Elves, referring to the predominant color with which they were most comfortable.

The Istari, too, were categorized by color. Saruman (and eventually Gandalf) is called the White, who stood at the head of the council. Gandalf was the Grey until his death and resurrection in Moria. Radgast the Brown is clearly of a different mentality or orientation than are Gandalf and Saruman, as his color indicates. We are told elsewhere that the original Istari who came into the world were five in number, the remaining two having the color blue. They went into the dark East and were never heard of again. An entertaining exercise would be to attempt to determine the character traits of Thorin Oakenshield and his traveling companions in *The Hobbit* by the classification given by the color of their respective hoods.

The languages of Middle Earth are light sensitive as well. A simple scanning of the Ring inscription in comparison with any of the High Elven speech will reveal that the elves favored front vowels (*i, e, a*) and the speakers of Black Speech preferred back vowels (*o, u*). A diligent study will reveal that Tolkien chooses consonants for his various languages the same way, dependent upon their affinity with light. Interestingly enough, the Glass of Galadriel is used at Minas Cirith by both Frodo and Sam to fend off evil. Both speak a language they do not know in evoking the power of the Star-Glass, yet Frodo speaks in High Elven and Sam in Sindarin. Is Tolkien not revealing something of his conception of the two characters by so doing? Clearly, he is.

Mordor is, of course, the quintessential place of darkness in Middle Earth, followed closely by the corruption that Saruman made of Isengard. Lothlorien, the Golden Wood of Galadriel, and Rivendale, the home of Elrond Half-Elven, are the counterpoints of light. The singular quibble that I have with the otherwise brilliant filming of *The Fellowship of the Ring* is that both Rivendale and Lothlorien are sometimes portrayed as dark (with a kind of blue patina) and somewhat somber. Tolkien's conception in the narrative is far more golden and festive all in all.

Destiny and Free Will

At the heart of Tolkien's creation is his fundamental acceptance of and belief in the well-developed theology of Catholicism. His is unflinching when it comes to the underlying principles by which his characters are motivated, the assumptions by which decisions are made, and by which powers rise and fall. Some of these principles are more easily illustrated than others. Tolkien's views on the moral agency of man, for example, can be articulated by two major episodes in *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

In the second chapter, "The Shadow of the Past," Frodo and Gandalf discuss the nature and history of the Ring, which has come to Frodo through an extraordinary chain of events. Though consistent with the whole conception of the fairy tale genre, it is a little unnerving to Frodo and to the reader to discover that the Ring has a will of its own.

"A Ring of Power looks after itself, Frodo. *It* may slip off treacherously, but its keeper never abandons it. At most he plays with the idea of handing it on to some one else's care—and that only at an early stage, when it first begins to grip. But as far as I know Bilbo alone in history has ever gone beyond playing, and really done it. He needed all my help, too. And even so he would never have just forsaken it, or cast it aside. It was not Gollum, Frodo, but the Ring itself that decided things. The Ring left *him*."

"What, just in time to meet Bilbo?" said Frodo. "Wouldn't an Orc have suited it better?"

"It is no laughing matter," said Gandalf. "Not for you. It was the strangest event in the whole history of the Ring so far: Bilbo's arrival just at that time, and putting his hand on it, blindly, in the dark."¹⁹

Here, then, we have characters that seem to be manipulated, pawns that are swept into orbit around the near omnipotence of the Ring of Power, and what once seemed mere happenstance turns to malignant purpose. As in the contrast between light and dark, however, Tolkien's characters become aware that in opposition to the Dark Power, there is another force—one for good—in the world.

"There was more than one power at work, Frodo. The Ring was trying to get back to its master. It had slipped from Isildur's hand and betrayed him; then when a chance came it caught poor Déagol, and he was murdered; and after that Gollum, and it had devoured him. It could make no further use of him: he was too small and

mean; and as long as it stayed with him he would never leave his deep pool again. So now, when its master was awake once more and sending out his dark thought from Mirkwood, it abandoned Gollum. Only to be picked up by the most unlikely person imaginable: Bilbo from the Shire!

“Behind that there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and *not* by its maker. In which case you also were *meant* to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought.”

“It is not,” said Frodo. “Though I am not sure that I understand you. But how have you learned all this about the Ring, and about Gollum? Do you really know it all, or are you just guessing still?”

Gandalf looked at Frodo, and his eyes glinted. “I knew much and I have learned much,” he answered. “But I am not going to give an account of all my doings to *you*. The history of Elendil and Isildur and the One Ring is known to all the Wise. Your ring is shown to be that One Ring by the fire-writing alone, apart from any other evidence.”²⁰

The opposing powers hinted at here become more clearly defined later in the narrative at the Bridge of Khazad-dum. Together with the orcs and trolls, a Balrog assaults the Fellowship. Notice the contrasts of light and dark, and particularly the titles that Gandalf gives to himself and the Balrog:

The Balrog reached the bridge. Gandalf stood in the middle of the span, leaning on the staff in his left hand, but in his other hand Glamdring gleamed, cold and white. His enemy halted again, facing him, and the shadow about it reached out like two vast wings. It raised the whip, and the thongs whined and cracked. Fire came from its nostrils. But Gandalf stood firm.

“You cannot pass,” he said. The orcs stood still, and a dead silence fell. “I am a servant of the Secret Fire, wielder of the flame of Anor. You cannot pass. The dark fire will not avail you, flame of Udun. Go back to the Shadow! You cannot pass.”

The Balrog made no answer. The fire in it seemed to die, but the darkness grew. It stepped forward slowly on to the bridge, and suddenly it drew itself up to a great height, and its wings were spread from wall to wall; but still Gandalf could be seen, glimmering in the gloom; he seemed small, and altogether alone: grey and bent, like a wizened tree before the onset of a storm.

From out of the shadow a red sword leaped flaming.

Glamdring glittered white in answer.

There was a ringing clash and a slab of white fire. The Balrog fell back and its sword flew up in molten fragments. The wizard swayed on the bridge, stepped back a pace, and then again stood still.

“You cannot pass!” he said.

With a bound the Balrog leaped full upon the bridge. Its whip whirled and hissed.

“He cannot stand alone!” cried Aragorn suddenly and ran back along the bridge. “Elendil!” he shouted. “I am with you, Gandalf!”

“Gondor!” cried Boromir and leaped after him.

At that moment Gandalf lifted his staff, and crying aloud he smote the bridge before him. The staff broke asunder and fell from his hand. A blinding sheet of white flame sprang up. The bridge cracked. Right at the Balrog’s feet it broke, and the stone upon which it stood crashed into the gulf, while the rest remained, poised, quivering like a tongue of rock thrust out into emptiness.

With a terrible cry the Balrog fell forward, and its shadow plunged down and vanished. But even as it fell it swung its whip, and the thongs lashed and curled about the wizard’s knees, dragging him to the brink. He staggered and fell, grasped vainly at the stone, and slid into the abyss. ‘Fly, you fools!’ he cried, and was gone.

The fires went out, and blank darkness fell. The Company stood rooted with horror staring into the pit.²¹

In the final chapter of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Tolkien demonstrates his preference for human agency, even in the face of compulsion and intimidation. Frodo has fled the distressing confrontation with Boromir and finds himself at the summit of Amon Hen, the Hill of Seeing, with the ring on his finger. In the midst of an extraordinary vision of the lands of Middle Earth, he sees the Fortress of Sauron, and all hope leaves him:

And suddenly he felt the Eye. There was an eye in the Dark Tower that did not sleep. He knew that it had become aware of his gaze. A fierce eager will was there. It leaped towards him; almost like a finger he felt it, searching for him. Very soon it would nail him down, know just exactly where he was. Amon Lhaw it touched. It glanced upon Tol Brandir—he threw himself from the seat, crouching, covering his head with his grey hood.

He heard himself crying out: *Never, never!* Or was it: *Verily I come, I come to you?* He could not tell. Then as a flash from some

other point of power there came to his mind another thought: *Take it off! Take it off!, Fool, take it off! Take off the Ring!*

The two powers strove in him. For a moment, perfectly balanced between their piercing points, he writhed, tormented. Suddenly he was aware of himself again. Frodo, neither the Voice nor the Eye: free to choose, and with one remaining instant in which to do so. He took the Ring off his finger. He was kneeling in clear sunlight before the high seat. A black shadow seemed to pass like an arm above him; it missed Amon Hen and groped out west, and faded. Then all the sky was clean and blue and birds sang in every tree.²²

Frodo will learn later that the opposing voice was Gandalf, exercising just enough of his own power against the effort of the Eye so that Frodo could decide for himself. This notion of being part of a destiny greater than one's own life yet having agency to determine the nature of one's own role in that destiny is not unique here. The principle is found throughout the corpus of Tolkien's work.

Conclusion

It is difficult to imagine a world more cynical and debased than the one in which we presently live, and it is clear that the world's weariness derives from those two elements more than any other. Tolkien's works are fundamentally optimistic and assert that beauty and goodness will ultimately triumph, although there is an unavoidable price to be paid. Because Tolkien's works are stylistically romantic, they turn the minds and hearts of the reader to a "golden age," a time of great prosperity and peace, a time of enlightenment. While Tolkien's cosmology does include such eras in the far-distant history of Middle Earth, it is the immediacy of the coming, glorious Fourth Age of Middle Earth that is ushered in with the destruction of the Ring of Power that is appealed to throughout the narrative—it is the Return of the King that counts in the end. Surely Latter-day Saints ought to resonate with that notion. The stories of Middle Earth can be just as morally compelling to the perceptive reader as tales told of the faithful ancestors battling against terrible odds to bring sanity and grace into an otherwise benighted world. The writings of J. R. R. Tolkien ought not to be trifled with. Middle Earth and its denizens were conceived by a gifted and educated mind, to the intent that this earth might be a better and brighter place in which to live—or at least so that we might believe that it can be, and that is essentially the beginning of the journey. ■

Notes

1. Much of the following biographical material is condensed from Humphrey Carpenter, *Tolkien: Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977).
2. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 5.
3. Humphrey Carpenter, ed., *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 214.
4. Carpenter, *Letters*, 144–45.
5. J. R. R. Tolkien, “Leaf by Niggle,” in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 85–112.
6. Carpenter, *Letters*, 172.
7. Carpenter, *Letters*, 288.
8. Carpenter, *Letters*, 407.
9. Tolkien, *Fellowship of the Ring*, 6–7.
10. For my detailed discussion of the controversy regarding Tolkien’s method of characterization, see “Tolkien’s Talent for Portraying Character: The Controversy,” in “Linguistic Techniques Used in Character Development in the Works of J. R. R. Tolkien” (Ph.D. dissertation, Purdue University, 1982). See also Tolkien’s own discussion on the fairy tale genre in “On Fairy-Stories,” *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 109–61.
11. Robley Evans, *Writers for the 70’s: J. R. R. Tolkien* (New York: Warner, 1972), 20.
12. Paul H. Kocher, *Master of Middle Earth: The Fiction of J. R. R. Tolkien* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), 85.
13. Neil D. Issacs and Rose A. Zimbardo, eds., *Tolkien and the Critics* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 15.
14. Max Lüthi, *Once Upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1976), 51–52.
15. Carpenter, *Letters*, 176.
16. Carpenter, *Letters*, 236.
17. Carpenter, *Letters*, 158n.
18. See extended discussions of each of these issues in my doctoral dissertation. Also, I refer readers to the journal *Mythlore*, wherein these and other elements of Tolkien’s narrative style have been treated at length.
19. Tolkien, *Fellowship of the Ring*, 64–65.
20. Tolkien, *Fellowship of the Ring*, 65.
21. Tolkien, *Fellowship of the Ring*, 344–45.
22. Tolkien, *Fellowship of the Ring*, 41.