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Tolkien's Biblical Epic

The long-lasting popularity of 'The Lord of the Rings' shows that in a secular age, readers still respond to Judeo-Christian teachings about morality, providence and power.

By Meir Soloveichik

Updated Sept. 2, 2023 12:01 am ET

If, in the 1930s, someone had sought to predict the bestselling English author of the 20th century, they probably would not have selected the Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford. John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, who died 50 years ago on Sept. 2, 1973, spent his entire professional life in the academy, yet his impact on the world reached far beyond the ivory tower. His "Lord of the Rings" series of novels, which launched the modern genre of fantasy literature, have sold over 150 million copies and served as the source material for the wildly successful films of Peter Jackson.

Tolkien's fame began with a much lighter work, "The Hobbit," published in 1937. A book for children, it is the story of Bilbo Baggins, a lazy creature who is suddenly startled into alacrity by a visiting wizard and an entourage of dwarves that recruit him to join their invasion of a dragon's den. Along the way, Bilbo acquires a useful ring that allows him to turn invisible, a magical device essential to the triumph of his quest.

Tolkien could have continued his career as an enormously successful children's author. Instead, he followed "The Hobbit" with the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy, in which it is revealed that the trinket discovered by Bilbo was forged long before by the dark lord Sauron. His discovery that the long-lost talisman has been found sets in motion a series of events in which characters from across the realm of Middle-Earth—the wizard Gandalf, humans, dwarves and elves—unite to battle against the forces of darkness. Bilbo's nephew Frodo is given the terrible task of bringing the ring deep into Sauron's territory, to destroy it in the fires in which it was forged.

Unlike "The Hobbit," the trilogy—comprising "The Fellowship of the Ring," "The Two Towers" and "The Return of the King"—is densely written, with paragraph upon paragraph describing the geography of Middle-Earth. (Peter Jackson's films retain this element of the novels: One viral parody movie trailer describes the movies as featuring "walking, roaming, hiking, more walking, and strolling.") Tolkien also wrote an appendix explaining the history of Middle-

Earth before Frodo's story and made up languages like Elvish out of the whole cloth.

Yet Tolkien believed that these details were essential, since a great literary creation must give its readers an entire world for their imaginations to inhabit. The complexity of Tolkien's world has in no way limited its popularity, with many fans devoting themselves to careful study of various aspects of Middle-Earth.



J.R.R. Tolkien in 1968. PHOTO: DAILY MAIL/SHUTTERSTOCK

Given that they feature wizards, orcs, goblins and elves, it is easy to conjecture that the magic of Tolkien's books lies in—well, magic. Yet no other fantasy series approaches the popularity of “The Lord of the Rings,” though many others feature elves and wizards aplenty. To understand the enduring enchantment of Tolkien's works, one must comprehend a central feature of his life that the 2019 biopic “Tolkien” largely chose to ignore: his Catholic faith.

If sales of “The Lord of the Rings” rival those of the Bible itself, it is because the series offers a profoundly biblical view of the world. The reality and consistency of human

sin described in Genesis is a central theme throughout Tolkien's books. Sauron's ring, rightly understood, is much more than a “MacGuffin”—an object whose only importance is that it helps move the plot forward. Rather, the ring is one of the true characters of the novel, representing sin and its many temptations.

The moral fragility of humanity is made manifest in the ways that some characters give in to those temptations. Yet others are able to resist them. Redemption ultimately comes to Middle-Earth through Aragorn, the descendant of a long-lost line of kings—a clear reference to the biblical story of David and to Isaiah's guarantee that David's heir will one day redeem the world. Christians like Tolkien identify this prophesied descendant as Jesus, though Aragorn more closely resembles the Jewish conception of the messiah as a great warrior-king.

The Bible asks us to see history through the lens of both providence and power, as events reflect the tension between human choice and divine intervention.

Tolkien, too, creates a world in which our individual choices make a difference, even as certain events are prophesied and foreseen. Sauron may triumph for a day, or even a generation, but the king will return, and our own actions help determine when that day will come. The fate of all Middle-Earth seems to hang on a single hobbit.

Today, more and more people in the West refrain from identifying with any faith, and some of our most popular stories, such as James Cameron's "Avatar," offer myths that are more pagan than biblical. Yet the fact that Tolkien's books continue to sell, and to be read, indicates that many people still believe that the complex interpretation of our world offered by Scripture is the most accurate depiction of reality. A story featuring some decidedly nonhuman characters gives us a profound meditation on human existence and the way our lives become important because of the roles we choose to play.

Faithful Jews and Christians believe, in different ways, in the ultimate "return of the king." But we also believe that we are called to live courageously in a world where that has not yet occurred. In one of the best-known scenes from the book and the film, Frodo ruefully wishes that he lived in a time before the ring was rediscovered, before evil made itself so profoundly manifest. "So do I," Gandalf replies, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

This advice given by a wizard to a hobbit offers a succinct summation of what the Bible communicates to humanity and what has sustained men and women of faith in some of the darkest of times. Fifty years after Tolkien's passing, the series that helped create the fantasy genre endures because of its realism.

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Appeared in the September 2, 2023, print edition as 'Tolkien's Biblical Epic'.