

**“Grace of the Valar”:  
The Lord of the Rings Movie<sup>1</sup>**

Film critics and many Tolkien fans responded to the three-part *Lord of the Rings* movie directed by Peter Jackson (2001, 2002, 2003) with ecstatic praise. Some claimed it as the cinematic equivalent of Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*, Mozart’s *Requiem* or Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Ludicrous praise of this sort aside, there is a certain magic about the films—a providential convergence of the newly developed CGI technology with brilliant acting, music and cinematography, all at the service of a story possessing unrivalled mythic resonance in the modern world.

For J. R. R. Tolkien’s story was an imaginative response of a cultured European soul to the two World Wars that mark the bleak “coming of age” of the modern experiment. Tolkien served in the first War, in the trenches of the Somme itself, and it was there that his imagination began to explore the darker possibilities of Faery. His son served in the second War, and the letters between them written at this time reflect both the intensity of their relationship and the slow progress of *The Lord of the Rings*

towards completion. This experience of two world wars brought Tolkien face to face with the greatest evils of our time, and especially with the great temptation of our time, that of technological power, which he dramatized in the form of the One Ring.

*Grasping the ring*

It is notable that movie audiences seem to have had no difficulty at all in recognizing the nature of the Ring, although the film’s portrayal of it might easily have been confusing. It is supposed to be a Ring of supreme Power, yet the only “powers” we see it grant are those of invisibility and extended life. It brings the creature Gollum only misery during the centuries that he possesses it. In the book we have the sense that, once mastered by its wearer, it would impart to him a great portion of the Dark Lord’s magical power over nature and other wills. We are told that the wearer of the Ring will be able to see and control those who wield the three Elven Rings whose destiny is entwined with its own. In the movie, however, the wearer of the Ring of Power appears to become instantly vulnerable—because highly visible to those he would most wish to avoid. In the flashback where we see its maker, Sauron, wearing the Ring three thousand years earlier, we find it neither rendering him invisible nor seemingly enabling him to quell the vast army of Elves and Men assembled against him. Indeed the Ring is cut from his hand by Elendil’s sword. Much later,

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<sup>1</sup>This paper is the revised version of an appendix that appears in Stratford Caldecott, *The Power of the Ring: The Spiritual Vision Behind The Lord of the Rings* (New York: Crossroad, 2005), 125–32. An earlier version also appears in *Flickering Images: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, ed. Anthony J. Clarke and Paul S. Fiddes (Oxford: Regent’s Park College, 2005), 193–205.

Frodo's possession of the Ring cannot prevent Gollum biting it from his finger. Yet we see the corrupting effects of the temptation to claim the Ring in each of the main characters who come into direct contact with it, and we perceive it through their eyes as an infinitely desirable thing, the concentrated essence of all that is most lusted after in Middle-earth, like the forbidden fruit proffered by the serpent in the Garden of Eden. To the characters in the movie, the Ring seems to offer not power but the *idea* of power. It promises something it can never deliver.

Thus the movie preserves some of the symbolic meaning attached to the Ring, if not quite all. The Ring of Sauron is perfectly smooth, bearing no stone. The writing that appears upon it when heated ("One Ring to rule them all... and in the darkness bind them") is invisible at room temperature. It is a circle of gold representing the self-loved Self, impregnable to others, cut off from genuine relationship, closed. No wonder it makes the wearer invisible to others, unreachable by light! Also it is a ring never received but always *taken*; not placed upon the finger as a gift, but claimed for oneself. As such it seems ironic that the prop used in the movie was a wedding ring that belonged to one of the film crew; for the One Ring in the story is the very antithesis of a wedding ring: it is the symbol and agent of isolation and domination rather than communion.

In his *Letters* and at various places in the posthumously published

twelve-volume "History of Middle-earth,"<sup>2</sup> Tolkien himself explains the ambiguous power of Sauron's Ring. For him it is the archetypal Machine, and it possesses all the false allure of technology in the modern world. In his story Tolkien explores two different types of technology, two different understandings of science, through the contrast between the magic of the Elves and that of the Enemy: the goal of the former is Art, whereas the aim of the latter is "domination and tyrannous re-forming of Creation." Technology always offers more power than it delivers, and its real effect is to make us increasingly dependent upon itself, and therefore in reality *less* powerful in ourselves. Sauron irrevocably places a measure of his own spirit into the Ring: the Ring enables him to bend his minions to his purpose, but as he does so his personal power is diminished, "spread out" among those he controls. The loss or destruction of the Ring therefore means a loss of control, even of his own bodily shape. The film picks up on the theme of "bad technology" and plays on contemporary environmental awareness by pitting the wizard Saruman—an

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<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Letter 211 in *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, edited by Humphrey Carpenter, published by George Allen & Unwin in 1981, and the discussion of technology in my *Secret Fire: the Spiritual Vision of J.R.R. Tolkien* (DLT, 2003), 44–49. *The History of Middle-earth*, vols. 1–12, edited by Christopher Tolkien, was published by Allen & Unwin and HarperCollins between 1983 and 1996 (see especially the volume entitled *Morgoth's Ring*).

ambitious pawn of Sauron, engaged in genetic experiments and the destruction of nature to fuel his factories—against the Ents, the tree-people, who exact their spectacular revenge upon Isengard in the second movie.

*The failure of the film*

Yet it is important to note that the film is flawed in many important respects. Tolkien himself would undoubtedly have loathed it. The action is noisy and unrelenting, the emotional scenes often sentimentally overwrought. Major characters have been distorted. Perhaps the most obvious example is Frodo himself. Infantilized like the other Hobbits, Frodo has also been stripped of almost all the strength of character and inner nobility he demonstrates in the book. At one point he allows Gollum to turn him against Sam, at another he exposes the Ring to the Nazgul (in a gratuitously invented scene set in Osgiliath—amusingly Sam rightly protests, “We are not even supposed to be here!”), and at the Crack of Doom he continues fighting with Gollum, almost falling into the fire himself. Other characters suffer almost as much or more at Jackson’s hands—not Gandalf, perhaps, nor Boromir, who are quite well realized for the most part, but Faramir, Elrond, and even Aragorn in some respects bear little resemblance to the characters in the book. Cate Blanchett’s Galadriel was a misjudged performance—perhaps she was trying to inject some otherworldly mystery into the character,

but instead she made Galadriel simply weird, and a bit sinister. In general the other Elves appear more insipid, smug, and pompous than the strong yet ethereal, serious yet fun-loving Elves of Tolkien’s masterpiece. We see them mainly at night or in twilight, whereas Tolkien finds them often (and certainly in Lothlórien) delighting in the broad light of day, brighter and more colourful than anything in the world we know. The Shire, too, is slightly mishandled by the filmmakers (although the reconstruction of Bag End is convincing enough). Probably only an English director could have understood quite how the balance of humour and seriousness was to be maintained in the case of the Shire. It was, after all, supposed to represent the world of real life within the novel, and Tolkien’s telling caricatures of rural English folk were gently affectionate. For Jackson, the caricature element prevails, the Shirelings become too clownish, and much of the complexity of Tolkien’s exploration of the English psyche is lost. This matters most at the end of the third movie, when the Scouring of the Shire (the necessary culmination of Tolkien’s story) is omitted completely, and the Travellers return to a homeland that has been completely unaffected by the great events away down South.

Of course, much can be said in mitigation of these failings. Several scenes correspond closely to the book. I think, for example, of Gandalf’s fall in Moria, Gollum fishing in the Forbidden Pool, the death of Boromir,

the lighting of the beacons along the White Mountains, the Ride of the Rohirrim, and the wonderful final scene on side of Mount Doom as the fires engulf Frodo and Sam and the Eagles descend. Some of the most moving moments in the film involve visual and musical images originating with Jackson and his team rather than Tolkien—and yet which appear to be genuinely in the spirit of the original story. For example, when Aragorn rides into Edoras, a pennant detached by the wind flutters down to fall at his feet, as if in silent tribute to the future King. Another example is the moment when Gandalf finds Theoden grieving for his son. The arrival of the Elvish reinforcements at Helm’s Deep, and the battle itself with its unlooked-for (eucatastrophic) finale are a mixture of Tolkienian and Jacksonian inspiration that work well. It seems clear that Jackson’s team, especially Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens, had a profound respect for “Professor Tolkien” (as they call him in the accompanying documentary) and wished to be faithful to his legacy, even if they did not succeed in every respect. The closing song “Into the West,” beautifully sung by Annie Lennox, captures Tolkien’s concern with death and the tragedy of history. It accurately conveys the “mood” of Tolkien’s story, shot through with Christian hope, and could only have been written by a lover of the book. The Great Sea, with the sound of its ceaseless waves and the crying of the white gulls, represents for Tolkien the spiritual world that enfolds Middle-

earth. Across that Sea the angelic Valar preside over the Land of the Blessed, and the music of the Sea echoes a Great Music that was before time, and was the archetype of time. The light of the stars that falls upon the waves is beautiful in part because light and music are deeply akin in Tolkien’s cosmology: vibrations in time that convey the harmony of the One that is secretly Three.

The film is about death, but it is also about a man achieving his destiny through self-mastery and service of others, and that man is clearly Aragorn, who moves from being a somewhat peripheral character when we encounter him in *The Fellowship of the Ring* to a much more central role in the second and third parts of the movie. This is not, however, the Aragorn of the novel, but a more modern character, initially much more confused, and in the end less majestic. He begins in a state of rejection, having renounced his claim to the kingship long ago, fearful of his own weakness, which is the weakness of men and of his ancestor Isildur. The Ring would not now be a problem for Middle-earth (we surmise) if Isildur had not taken it for his own, against the advice of Elrond. Thus the War of the Ring is Aragorn’s war in a very personal sense, and not just because by it he may win the throne of Gondor. The definitive rejection of the temptation represented by the Ring is his task, even more than it is Frodo’s. The combined will and self-sacrifice of Aragorn and Sam jointly carry Frodo to the threshold of his

mission. Aragorn even lets Frodo and Sam go off alone at the falls of Rauros at the end of the first segment, when he could easily have stopped them. He gently closes Frodo's hand around the Ring. For though the Ring is Aragorn's by right of conquest, as the heir of Isildur, Frodo is taking it where he cannot, with his permission and support. (The viewer may be forgiven for wondering why Aragorn does not take it to Mordor himself, if he is capable of resisting its appeal after all. Here we may say in Jackson's defence that he has borrowed from Tolkien's Faramir, who successfully refuses the temptation of the Ring when he meets it in Ithilien.) Though the rejection of the Ring is Aragorn's task, Frodo must bear the Ring itself: this is why Aragorn's unexpected cry "For Frodo!" during the final charge at the Black Gate, though Tolkien would certainly never have put such a modern expression into his mouth, is (arguably) appropriate in the context of the film. Jackson interweaves the struggle of Frodo and Sam up the side of Mount Doom with the events at the Black Gate in a way that suggests that for him these are intended to form the two halves of a single psychodrama.

In fact, the filmic version of Aragorn's tale, though a radical distortion of the book, may also have been more appropriate to our present cultural situation. The film-makers did not change the story or the character carelessly. They had observed the theme of "hope" that Tolkien had woven around Aragorn, whose Elvish

name—Estel—means just that, and they preserved it with great care and subtlety. They wanted to show the man struggling to rise to the level of his destiny. More than in the novel, the force that impels Aragorn into his ultimate transformation is the love of Elrond's daughter Arwen. In the novel, the nuptial theme between men and women, between Men and Elves, is delicately present and foundationally important, though the romance with Arwen was largely relegated to an Appendix. It is to the credit of Jackson's film that this receives greater emphasis, even to the extent of adding a taste of "Marian intercession" to Arwen's role in the story (for example at the Fords of Isen where she prays for the "grace of the Valar" to descend on Frodo, and when in Rivendell the book falls from her hand as though to recall images of the Annunciation). In Jackson's version, it is Arwen's faith in the destiny of her lover, and in her destiny with him as the mother of his child, that "mothers" him into existence as King. One of the most poignant scenes in the third movie is that in which Arwen, in the process of departing from Middle-earth, having accepted Aragorn's decision to break off the engagement, has a vision of their future child and rides back to confront and contradict her father in Rivendell. Arwen's heart-piercing vision is a moment of supreme beauty—perhaps one of the most powerful "pro-life" moments in cinema, and appropriately so in light of the centrality in Tolkien's *legendarium* of the marriage

of Elves and Men. Yet her destiny is linked with Aragorn's in a more complex way than Tolkien ever suggested. She becomes mortally ill, having renounced Elvish immortality, which forces Elrond to recognize the need to re-forged the shards of Narsil into Andúril, the Flame of the West. With the sword of kingship finally in his hand, knowing that the life of Arwen depends on the destruction of the Ring, Aragorn is at last able to overcome the fear of his own weakness that had been holding him back, and musters the authority to summon the Dead to fight at his side in the battle for Minas Tirith.

*A true story*

J. R. R. Tolkien created a mythology, not just for England as he had originally intended,<sup>3</sup> but for the whole modern world. "Mythology," in the sense Tolkien gave it, is not merely a pack of lies dreamed up by men too primitive to be acquainted with scientific truth. It is a way of capturing truths that cannot be adequately expressed except in story, and which need to be communicated on several levels at once. Peter Jackson has retained enough of the original story to achieve an impact on the popular psyche that few film-makers could hope to emulate.

The actor Viggo Mortensen, who plays Aragorn in the film, was asked in various interviews why he thought

the film, like the book, had proved so incredibly popular. "Because it is a true story," he replied simply. It is indeed a true story, not a "fantasy" at all, despite the CGI monsters and other special effects. At its heart it is a re-telling in mythical mode of the One True Story, the "Fairytale that becomes Fact" in the Gospel. *The Lord of the Rings* (both book and film) is a story about light and darkness, heroism in the face of what Théoden calls "overwhelming hate," life affirmed in the face of death. It is the story of our civilization, and the great speech of Aragorn to the Men of the West before the Black Gate—entirely an invention of the film-makers, yet fully in the spirit of the book—is a direct challenge to our own time to stand fast and give battle for the sake of our civilization (of which Gondor represents the mythological ideal). We too need the "King" to take his throne. For then we can go back to our own polluted landscape, with its mean brick houses and its small-minded officials, its devastated orchards and missing avenues of trees. We can return endowed with the authority of servants and friends of the King, to commence our own task, the task which awaits us here at home: the "scouring of the Shire."

As already mentioned, this important final climax of the War of the Ring—the purification of Hobbiton by the returning heroes—was sadly omitted from the film (even from the extended version). It could have been included, if Jackson had realized its importance and been prepared to

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<sup>3</sup>See Letter 131 in the published *Letters*.

sacrifice some of the overlong fight and monster scenes, along with other indulgences such as the embarrassing “bedroom romp” when Frodo has returned from Mordor.

Nevertheless, Tolkien’s message survives this amputation remarkably well. *The Lord of the Rings* embodies a sense of reverence for the living whole to which humanity belongs. That “whole” may be taken in three senses: it is the world of Nature, the world of Tradition, and the spiritual world of Providence. Modernity, in its negative aspect, is a rebellion against these three worlds. Despite my strong criticisms of the movie series, I believe Peter Jackson’s team captures enough of these concerns in the movie to remind us of something that had almost been lost to our civilization. Let me consider each, briefly, in turn.

*Reverence for the world of Nature* is present not simply in the care with which her moods, her weathers, and her elements are lovingly described throughout the novel, and of course vividly represented in the film, but in their portrayal as spiritually animated, sometimes (as in the case of the Ents and Eagles) even speaking with human language. Yet this is no godless “bucolic paganism.” Tolkien’s Elvish equivalent of the “Old Testament,” *The Silmarillion*, makes it clear that Middle-earth is the creation of Eru Ilúvatar, the God beyond all gods, whose care extends to the smallest details of the great drama even when it is exerted through the mediation of creatures. Hints of this are scattered

throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. The film, too, conveys glimpses of transcendence through nature. Two tiny scenes that admirers of the book will be glad to see restored to them by the DVD make the point well: the crown of flowers on the fallen head of the old King’s statue illuminated momentarily by the dying sun in Ithilien, and the lovely moment when Sam notices a star shining through the cloud-wrack of Mordor, speaking of a beauty high above the world that evil can obscure but never touch. Tolkien knew that monotheism, and ultimately Christianity itself, is perfectly compatible with a strong sense of a sacred presence within nature, and indeed provides the only secure basis for believing in the inherent value of the natural world (which the God of Genesis repeatedly pronounces “good”).

*Reverence for Tradition* runs directly counter to the modern obsession with equality, and is perhaps the least well served by Jackson’s movies. As Chesterton wrote, Tradition is the “democracy of the dead,” in which a group of the living are not allowed to overrule their ancestors just because they happen to be alive.<sup>4</sup> Customs and cultures are hallowed by time,

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<sup>4</sup>This famous phrase of Chesterton’s occurs in the second chapter of *Orthodoxy* (1908), “The Ethics of Elfland.” “Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about.”

whether for good or ill. In the novel (though not the film), when the Men of Gondor under Faramir's command eat together, they first stand in silence and face the West: looking "to Númenor that was, and beyond to Elvenhome that is, and to that which is beyond Elvenhome and will ever be." Living in remembrance of the past, celebrating it, rehearsing it, is an essential part of keeping any culture alive and growing—or of renewing it when it has almost failed. Thus when Aragorn is crowned King, he echoes the words of his forefather Elendil as he stepped on to dry land from the ruin of Númenor thousands of years before: "Out of the Great Sea to Middle-earth I am come. In this place will I abide, and my heirs, unto the ending of the world." In the film, the actor sings the words to music he has himself composed, so close is his identification with the part. All the more pity, then, that the film-makers insist on placing immediately afterwards in Aragorn's mouth an unnecessarily clumsy extra speech about "rebuilding our world."

From first to last, the civilizations of Middle-earth, whether these be the warrior-societies of Rohan and Gondor or the peaceable farming and trading communities that make up the Shire, are built up through remembrance and custom. It is a modern mistake to think that great personalities can grow without being rooted in the rich soil of the past, in the memory of great deeds and in fidelity to promises made across the generations. Civilization is founded on covenants

that cannot be broken without consequence. The great army of the dead will fight to regain its honour in the service of the King.

*Reverence for the spiritual world* underlies the reverence Tolkien shows for Nature and for Tradition. The world of Nature and the world of Culture have a significance beyond themselves. They possess a *form*, a meaning. They reveal something, a beauty, that lies not simply beyond them, but within them. The world is a story, as a master story-teller could not but recognize. Stories have a beginning, a middle and an end; and they have a Teller. There is a pattern to the Story of the World beyond the knowledge or grasp of the characters who play a part within it, as Gandalf, Aragorn, Sam and Frodo in their various ways become aware at different points in the adventure. Every event that takes place, no matter how trivial or seemingly accidental, has a purpose within the whole, and forms a thread or a colour within a tapestry that is being woven by the choices and decisions we make or are forced to make moment by moment.

It is not merely, as Aragorn says to Éomer in the book, that we walk both in legends and in the broad daylight because "those who come after will make the legends of our time." Rather, some things are *meant* to be—as, for example, we are told in both book and film, Bilbo was "*meant* to find the Ring, and *not* by its Maker." The whole pattern is obscure until it can be viewed *sub specie aeternitatis*. It may not be clear to us



why we are here, what we are accomplishing on earth, or what we are doing wrong, for we have not yet entered the world of vision that lies “out of memory and time.” But when we do, our faith tells us that even the most apparently pointless suffering will be seen to have a sufficient reason and a place in the whole.

*A call to arms*

Nature, Tradition and Religion are all under attack in the modern world. If Tolkien has succeeded in evoking a nostalgia for these things in the world of the imagination, that is not escapism but therapy. There are three possible responses to such nostalgia. One is retreat. That would be the true escapism, the escapism of the grim “realist” who wants to bury his face in the modern world to hide from the deeper truths stirred into life by *The Lord of the Rings*. Another response is to rekindle the embers of this triple reverence in our own lives, by trying to preserve Nature, by respecting the worthy Traditions of our culture (call this, if you like, a “discerning conservatism”) and finally by deepening our spiritual life. For Catholics and Orthodox this will mean a participation in the sacraments that celebrate and renew the meaning of the Story.

The third response, which is equally necessary if we have been “awoken” by Tolkien, is to discern the ways in which our modern way of life undermines the second response, the return to Religion. In his pub-

lished letters, for example, Tolkien refers to what he calls the “tragedy and despair” of our reliance on technology.<sup>5</sup> In the story, this tragedy is vividly illustrated in many ways, not least by the corrupted wizard Saruman, with what Treebeard (the voice of Nature) calls his “mind of metal and wheels.” (To emphasize the point, Jackson has Saruman meet his death impaled on the machinery of Isengard.) In the modern world, with its ecological disasters and its factory farms, we have seen the devastating and dehumanising effects of Saruman’s purely pragmatic approach to nature.

The English Romantic movement, from Blake and Coleridge to the Inklings themselves, believed there must be an alternative. At the end of his wonderful essay on education, *The Abolition of Man*, C. S. Lewis writes of a “regenerate science” of the future that “would not do even to minerals and vegetables what modern science threatens to do to man himself. When it explained it would not explain away. When it spoke of the parts it would remember the whole.”<sup>6</sup> The goal of our present science, by and large, is power over the forces of nature. (Of course, the quest is also for understanding, but since Bacon the identification of knowledge with power has become ever more com-

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<sup>5</sup>Letter 75.

<sup>6</sup>*The Abolition of Man or Reflections on education with special reference to the teaching of English in the upper forms of school* (London: Fount, 1978), 47.

plete.) According to Lewis, the “magician’s bargain” tells us the price of all such power: nothing less than our own souls. The conquest of nature turns out to be our conquest *by* nature, that is to say by our own desires or those of others; and the one who aspires to be the Master of the world becomes, in the end, a puppet.<sup>7</sup>

Tolkien always insisted that his fantasy was not an *allegory*. Mordor is not supposed to be Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia. “To ask if the Orcs ‘are’ Communists is to me as sensible as asking if Communists are Orcs,” he once wrote.<sup>8</sup> But at the same time he did not deny that the story is “applicable” to contemporary affairs, indeed he affirmed this.<sup>9</sup> It is applicable not merely in providing a parable to illustrate the danger of the Machine, but in showing the reasons for that danger: sloth and stupidity, pride, greed, folly and lust for power, all exemplified in the various races of Middle-earth. Against these vices he set courage and courtesy, kindness and humility, generosity and wisdom, in those same hearts. There is a universal moral law, he demonstrates, but it is not the law of a tyrant. It is the law of love and mercy—the one and only law that makes it possible for us to be free.

Our world is shown too many images of evil, and too few of heroic and attractive goodness. It is sad that

more of Tolkien’s vision of humility and spiritual greatness was not successfully translated to the screen, but we should be profoundly grateful to Peter Jackson and his group for the elements that were. The landscape of cinema has been changed for ever. □

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., ch. 3, esp. p. 43.

<sup>8</sup>Letter 203.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.