

Why did J.R.R. Tolkien write *The Lord of the Rings*? For the answer to this question, we need look no further than the pen of Tolkien himself:

The Lord of the Rings has been read by many people since it finally appeared in print ten years ago; and I should like to say something here with reference to the many opinions or guesses that I have received or have read concerning the motives and meaning of the tale. The prime motive was the desire of a tale-teller to try his hand at a really long story that would hold the attention of the readers, amuse them, delight them, and at times maybe excite them or deeply move them. . . . As for any inner meaning or message, it has in the intention of the author none. It is neither allegorical nor topical.¹

Did Tolkien intend to write anything other than a great story when he wrote *The Lord of the Rings*? Again we look to the pen of the author:

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 the 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.²

A true Tolkien fan, it seems, would want to honor the intentions of the author, who did not like allegory. Yet there is so much in Tolkien's writings that seem to point to wonderful events and persons in salvation history and in the Church that it is very difficult to say that it is simply a great story. Can the conflict be resolved? Yes. The key is the second Tolkien quote that we have offered above. In the quote, Tolkien makes a key distinction between "applicability" and "allegory". Applicability "resides in the freedom of the reader", while allegory resides "in the purposed domination of the author". In other words, the reader is free to see allegory, metaphor, topical references, *et cetera* in *The Silmarillion*, *The Hobbit*, or *The Lord of the Rings* even though the author did not intend them. It seems that Tolkien was a man so imbued with Catholic Christian reality that every word he writes points to reality – to the Truth, who is a Person. Praised be Jesus Christ, now and forever!

Indeed, it is "the best of both worlds". Tolkien has written a great epic tale that can truly delight and move us. C.S. Lewis stated that this tale will make us cry. At the same time, we can make some very rich applications of this remarkable tale to salvation

¹J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994) ix-x; from the author's Foreword.

²J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994) x-xi; from the author's Foreword.

"I am Isildur's heir; fight for me, and I will hold your oaths fulfilled!" -Aragorn to the Men of the Mountains

history, to the Church, to Divine Providence, and to the remarkable world –now broken yet redeemed – that God has created for us. Indeed, as Peter Kreeft has said, “Middle-earth is our earth.”

“I am Isildur's heir; fight for me, and I will hold your oaths fulfilled!” -Aragorn to the Men of the Mountains

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