

# The Gospel According to J. R. R. Tolkien

Ralph Wood, Baylor University

- I. Tolkien's unaccountable popularity, and thus the charge of escapism. The truth is that the *Rings* constitute a gigantic escape *into* reality—out of the prison of evil and the culture of death through a re-visioning of the Gospel that can be discerned in it. Yet not an allegory, as in C. S. Lewis, but a pre-Christian heroic epic imbued with deeply Christian and Catholic concerns—while omitting formal religion, sex, and cities.
- II. **Creation:** a retelling of the Genesis story in *The Silmarillion*, with Ilúvatar (the All-Father) directing the cosmos (Eä, the heavens and earth) as a grand symphony rather than speaking it into being, and with the *valar* (masculine and feminine) as the rough equivalent of angels or pagan deities. They are 15 in number, and they work with Ilúvatar to accomplish his will in the world. The *maiar* are servants and helpers of the valar, and like the valar they have the possibility of rejecting the will of Ilúvatar. Tolkien's universe is not egalitarian but stratified, and yet it is a not fixed and frozen hierarchy: everyone can move up or down the great ladder of being, toward paradise or perdition.
- III. **Calamity:** a refusal of the divine harmony, a desire to make one's own independent music. One of the three solitary valar, *Melkor*, became impatient with the slow workings of Ilúvatar and demanded the power to create his own world. The other valar defeated him and cast him into the Void, but he escaped and corrupted a lieutenant named *Sauron*. Like Satan, Sauron has corrupted many groups of men and dwarves. By the power of his one Ruling Ring, he ensnared the wearers of the nine rings that had made been for men, who have become the terrible Ringwraiths. Yet Sauron has been unable to master the dwarves, though their seven rings did make the dwarves lust after gold and other precious metals. The three rings fashioned for elves without Sauron's assistance have the power to create and understand and heal, and they remain completely uncorrupted by Sauron. Yet their wielders would be revealed if Sauron regains the One Ring, and their own power will be destroyed if he and the Ring are destroyed. Until then, it possesses three deadly corrupting powers:
  - A. Power to overcome death—thus granting unending physical life. Perhaps the chief idolatry of our time, the worship of health and longevity, whereas the naturally immortal elves, while understanding the full cosmic process, also envy men for their great *blessing* of death.
  - B. Power to become invisible—thus granting magical disappearance. Hence the ability to acquire goods without effort, whereas everything worth having is meant to be acquired slowly, not quickly and easily. Yet evil has a shadowy, unreal existence, lacking any creative power, able only to pervert our virtues and to destroy the good. It has no imaginative sympathy, only the flat, unpenetrating eye of Sauron.
  - C. Power to coerce the will of others—making evil horribly addictive because it is not merely seductive but also bullying—as when Frodo's will is finally overwhelmed in the end. This is exactly the doctrine of Original Sin as a one-way street that cannot be cured by our own effort, but that can be healed only by a transcendent and redemptive power beyond it.
- III. **Correction** through the pagan virtues as transformed into distinctively Christian qualities:
  - A. *Prudence* (wisdom) as understanding the world's moral order and acting accordingly: Gandalf
  - B. *Justice* as defending the weak and the helpless: Aragorn
  - C. *Courage* as the willingness to die for the sake of the good: Boromir
  - D. *Temperance* as radical self-denial: Legolas and Gimli
- IV. **Consummation** through the distinctively Christian virtues revealed in Israel and Christ and the Church
  - A. *Faith* as the trusting friendship of the Company, especially as exemplified by Merry and Pippin
  - B. *Hope* as a vision of the ultimate triumph of the good, chiefly as revealed in Samwise Gamgee
  - C. *Charity* as the willingness to forgive even the egregiously evil, as first in Bilbo's and later in Frodo's pity on both Gollum and Saruman