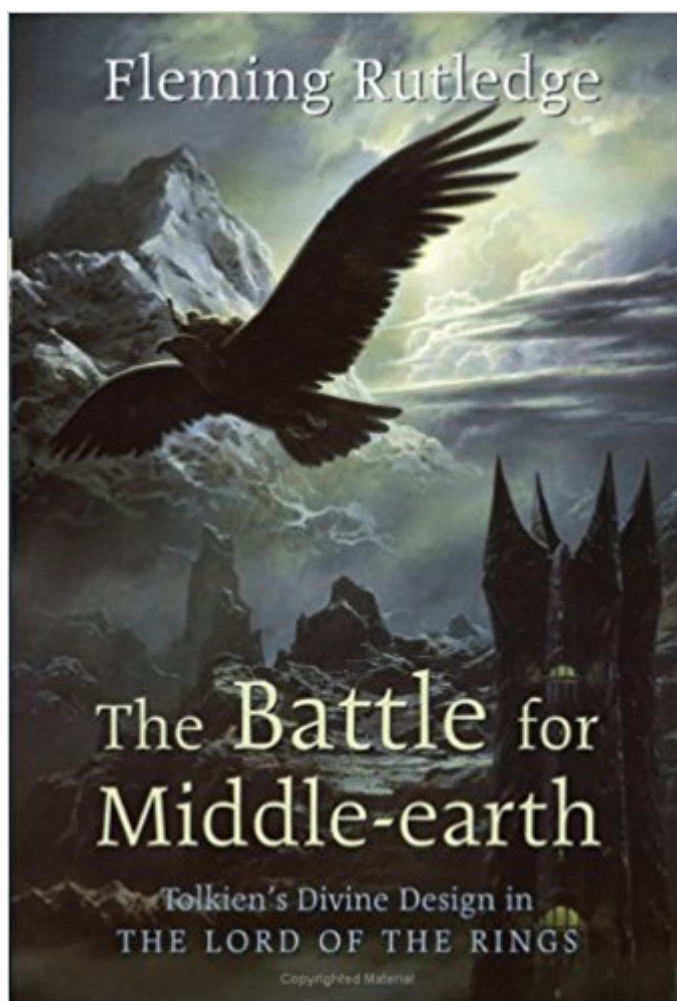


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The Battle For Middle-earth: Tolkien's Divine Design In The Lord Of The Rings



Synopsis

J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* has long been acknowledged as the gold standard for fantasy fiction, and the recent Oscar-winning movie trilogy has brought forth a whole new generation of fans. Many Tolkien enthusiasts, however, are not aware of the profoundly religious dimension of the great Ring saga. In *The Battle for Middle-earth* Fleming Rutledge employs a distinctive technique to uncover the theological currents that lie just under the surface of Tolkien's epic tale. Rutledge believes that the best way to understand this powerful "deep narrative" is to examine the story as it unfolds, preserving some of its original dramatic tension. This deep narrative has not previously been sufficiently analyzed or celebrated. Writing as an enthusiastic but careful reader, Rutledge draws on Tolkien's extensive correspondence to show how biblical and liturgical motifs shape the action. At the heart of the plot lies a rare glimpse of what human freedom really means within the Divine Plan of God. *The Battle for Middle-earth* surely will, as Rutledge hopes, "give pleasure to those who may already have detected the presence of the sub-narrative, and insight to those who may have missed it on first reading."

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Customer Reviews

Commentaries on The Lord of the Rings trilogy have been a cottage industry recently, as the film installments attract new readers to J.R.R. Tolkien's modern classic. In *The Battle for Middle-Earth: Tolkien's Divine Design in The Lord of the Rings*, preacher Fleming Rutledge offers a commentary that "is about God first of all

Christianity & Literature "If I had to recommend a single work that most completely discloses the theological and moral quality of Tolkien's entire mythological enterprise, I would without hesitation name Fleming Rutledge's *The Battle for Middle-earth*." Ralph C. Wood "Fleming Rutledge writes about the moral and theological life of *The Lord of the Rings* with immense verve and insight. She inhabits the world of Middle-earth from the inside, linking the characters who play out its cosmic drama with the narrative world of Scripture, showing how they have the power both to illuminate our times and to transform our lives." Thomas H. Luxon "Fear not! Fleming Rutledge has carefully avoided reducing Tolkien's thrilling stories to doctrine or his characters to typology. With just the right expository pressure, Rutledge shows how the Tolkien stories we love are woven from the same threads and are concerned with the same questions as the old, old stories of the Bible — a book Tolkien loved as no other." Bradley J. Birzer "Rutledge smartly argues that Tolkien's mythology is an immense and intense theological drama, with God at the very center of the plot. And, even if God remains unseen in Middle-earth, He is no more unseen than in our present, postmodern world. Certainly Tolkien had no trouble seeing Him, and, according to Rutledge's excellent book, we shouldn't either — in this world or in Middle-earth. Grace abounds throughout all of creation."

Why do we cherish *Lord of the Rings*? Tolkien never concedes that there is a God in his set of three, however Fleming Rutledge discovers him for us in his book. We as a whole have some great, some shrewdness in us, and in some cases it takes a more prominent energy to tip the parities. Fleming Rutledge convincingly looks at LOTR to the dramatizations of the Bible. This is an unquestionable requirement perused for any Tolkien fan!

Overall, I recommend this book to anyone who is interested in how Tolkien's personal faith influenced his writing. The writer makes a compelling and, in the end, convincing argument that LOTR is a fundamentally Christian/Catholic work about a loving God working to save humanity in a pre-Christian world. The author makes good use both of hints in the text of LOTR and *The Hobbit* themselves as well as of Tolkien's letters to make her points. The book is also generally well-written and shows a reasonably good understanding of Tolkien's world. Other reviewers have pointed out, however, some of the "factual" inaccuracies in this book. I, too, found them distracting and felt that they detracted from the weight of the author's arguments, but not to a serious, much less fatal, degree. There were some things that the author did that actually did take away significantly from my

enjoyment of the book and from my appreciation for the underlying arguments. First, the author reuses the same biblical quotes on several occasions when a simple reference to the earlier quote would suffice. Attentive readers don't need to get hit in the head with the same text over and over. Second, the author makes repeated negative references to post 9/11 United States foreign policy. Analysis of these issues is not only beyond the author's apparent expertise, but also beyond the scope of the book and would be better left for her own sermons or for cocktail party discussion rather than as part of her literary/religious discussion. Third, there is a fair amount of repetition, particularly in the author's explanation of certain themes in Tolkien and in the Bible. She should explain these well, once, and then simply refer back to her earlier discussion. Having mentioned these criticisms, there are some small but important things that the author does well (other than the previously-praised elucidation of her primary argument). One of the most important is that she does not treat Tolkien and his work as being unimpeachable monuments of English Literature. I smiled appreciatively when she mentioned Tolkien's verse is not his best writing and when she hinted that some of his descriptions of plant life might have run on a bit longer than many readers might have wished. She also does not suffer from the conceit of many literary critics that they know and understand exactly why the author did everything the author did and that they have a theory that explains perfectly every word of the work under discussion. For example, she admits that Tom Bombadil is something of a mystery and that he may not fit very well into her theory of the work as a whole. So, overall, I do recommend this book. Anyone who has spent a lot of time with LOTR will learn something interesting and enlightening about this work and will gain greater insight into what Tolkien was trying to teach us. That, in itself, justifies the price of its purchase and the time spent reading it.

This is an excellent book for those interested in understanding Tolkien's assertion that his work was fundamentally Catholic; I am not a biblical scholar, so I was very interested in the parallels the author was able to draw between biblical themes and imagery and those in LOTR. However, the effect of the book for me was marred by factual errors in referencing LOTR. [Ex.: she quotes the fact of Merry's sword being the work of Westmarch, then proceeds to talk about it as if it were made by elves in Gondolin!] There are similar errors throughout -- not a whole lot, but enough to mar the impact of the whole. Additionally, Rutledge cannot resist doing what she quotes Tolkien as specifically decrying: making direct analogies between a current political situation and the LOTR narrative -- in a one-sided fashion. Again, she did not do this often (and admittedly kept those comments to the footnotes most of the time), but the one-sidedness of the judgement detracted

from the impact of her overall thesis. Worth reading for those interested in seeing the biblical roots of Tolkien's philosophy.

Fleming Rutledge is arguably the ideal critic of *The Lord of the Rings*. An ardent student of English literature, an orthodox (Episcopal/Anglican) priest, and a gifted writer, she brings to bear impressive resources in analyzing an often- or over-analyzed work. In doing so, she builds an impressive case in support of a seldom-heard conclusion: Tolkien's masterpiece is a masterpiece not only of storytelling, but also of theology and, perhaps, evangelism. In making this case, Rutledge relies not only on her careful reading of the text (including its prequel, *The Hobbit*), but also on Tolkien's letters (as indicated by extensive and informative footnoting). In particular, she challenges commonly held ideas about the epic, including but not limited to the following: (1) it is a tale of pure good versus absolute evil; (2) it occurs in another world; and (3) it lacks a divine presence. Other repeated topics include rational inferences as to how Tolkien would feel about modern cultures and wars and Rutledge's juxtaposition of the text and Peter Jackson's film trilogy. Rutledge's writing is clear and often striking. That said, the book is slightly more repetitive (and thus longer) than it needs to be, and on occasion, it feels like Rutledge is reaching for an appropriate Biblical verse or analogy. Nevertheless, this is a serious, thorough, and important study of the epic--structured not thematically but parallel to the narrative--that future students and critics cannot afford to ignore. And as for Christians who enjoy fantasy literature, this is essentially a collection of essays and sermons focusing on one of fantasy's great works. (For this latter group, this would be an ideal birthday or Christmas gift.) Highly recommended for either group. 4-1/2 gleaming elven jewels.

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