



J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings Trilogy and the Christ-Symbolism of Samwise Gamgee

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J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy
and the Christ-Symbolism of Samwise Gamgee

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Abstract

In this thesis on J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* it is argued that the apparently simple character Samwise Gamgee (Sam) emerges as an intermittent but increasingly important figure of Christ. He does so through his roles as gardener and servant, his single combat with Shelob, and ultimately through his suffering with Frodo at Mount Doom.

A series of questions is pursued. First, how does Sam's character connect with the biblical metaphors of Christ as gardener and servant? Second, how does Sam's seemingly non-militant role in the mythos of Tolkien's Middle-earth—and its cosmic war of good against evil—connect with the biblical theme of spiritual warfare focused on the “armour of God” (Ephesians 6:11). Third, how does our understanding of Tolkien's symbolism, as it gathers intensity, illuminate the bold metaphor of Mount Doom as Middle-earth's Golgotha, and Sam's *agon* with Shelob as shadowing the Passion? Finally, what are the more widely distributed, and subtler metaphors through which the character of Sam is made to shadow the roles of priest, prophet, and king?

Reference is made to scholarship on the trilogy of novels, and to a lesser extent on biblical scholarship. But the investigation draws primarily on textual evidence from Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and from the King James Bible,

supplemented by the Jerusalem Bible, a translation on which Tolkien himself worked.

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my mother for her unwavering support, encouragement and belief in me through all my endeavors. And to my daughter Isabella, who among other things, continues to inspire me through her strength, highly insightful observations about the world we live in, and her ability to always make me laugh through it all with her great wit.

Acknowledgment

First and foremost, I offer my profound appreciation to the One that Tolkien referred to as “the only just literary critic” for gracing me with a unique insight into Sam’s character— and for placing my thesis director, Dr. Gordon Teskey, in my path to help guide me through my thesis journey and bring it to fruition. Accordingly, I would like to express my deepest and heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Teskey for his unparalleled dedication, wisdom, graciousness, encouragement and support.

I would like to also extend these sentiments to my research advisor, Dr. Talaya Delaney, for her invaluable contribution in directing my research, and for her tremendous encouragement and support as well.

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Introduction

The three parts of J.R.R. Tolkien's, *The Lord of the Rings—The Fellowship of the Ring, The Two Towers, and The Return of the King*—were published between 1954 and 1955. The series follows and enormously expands on Tolkien's 1937 novel, *The Hobbit*. Despite being a difficult read due to its expansive and intricately plotted narrative, Tolkien's trilogy has proven to be enormously popular as well as widely acclaimed. It has been named one of the top 100 books of all time and voted fifth of the 100 of the best-loved novels. The film version of *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*, directed by Peter Jackson in 2004, won eleven Academy Awards, tying *Ben-Hur* and *Titanic* for the record. It is also the most awarded film series in cinematic history, winning 475 awards out of 800 nominations.¹ Although literary critics have not yet been willing to rank Tolkien with great modern voices such as Joyce and Proust, Tolkien's unique style and brilliant imagination, in addition to his immense popularity, will surely place him among the modern masters in the long run. Tolkien is a myth-maker of genius. But why is he important?

From the time *The Lord of the Rings* was first published, scholars have disagreed on the fundamental theme that governs the many levels of meaning in *The Lord of the Rings*. However, to argue tenaciously for the dominance of one single

¹ Record for Academy Awards is recorded in Guinness World Records and additional film awards listed in IMDb 2020

meaning in such a rich work may not be respectful of the variety and independence of the parts, as if there were a “one ring” to bind all the meanings as well. Among the subjects offered as governing the work are World Wars I and II, the perils of industrialization, Norse Mythology, Celtic Mythology, Arthurian myth, Environmentalism, Christianity in general, and Roman Catholicism in particular. The view that appears to be most widely held by literary critics is that *The Lord of the Rings* is an allegory for World War I, in which Tolkien served in the British army and lost three of his closest friends in that conflict (Carpenter 124). Further supporting the perception of these critics, an eponymous biopic, “Tolkien,”² was released in theaters on May 2019, and presented the author as drawing his inspiration for the book from World War I, specifically the Battle of the Somme.

Tolkien was a distinguished philologist and Oxford professor, specializing in Old and Middle English as well as Old Norse literature. And of course he did serve as an officer in the First World War, including the especially terrible battle of the Somme. That experience surely marked him in his subsequent life, accounting for his view of the world as starkly divided between good and evil and giving him a more heroic—some would say, naive, although I certainly would not—view of war than is commonly reflected in the outlook of modern authors generally, most of

² The film was released by Disney through Fox Searchlight Pictures and directed by Dome Karukoski. It received overall poor reviews and was criticized for not reflecting the impact of Tolkien’s religious faith (Womack 2019).

whom did not serve in front-line combat. Those who did, among them Tolkien's friends C. S. Lewis, Robert Graves, and David Jones, have a deeper and less cynical (but also more terrible) view of war and of heroism, including heroic sacrifice, such as we see time and again in *The Lord of the Rings*.

But one side of Tolkien not often remarked on is that he was a biblical scholar and, as a Roman Catholic, was moved by a deep Christian faith. He was at one time the editor of the Jerusalem Bible, for which he translated the Book of Jonah. Indeed, Tolkien confided in an essay that the date of the One Ring's destruction, March 25th (the traditional date of the Annunciation and Crucifixion) was "intentionally chosen by me" (Ryken 28). Moreover, in a letter to Father Robert Murray, Tolkien wrote, "*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision" (Letters 172). Literary critics have discerned religious elements and allusions in *The Lord of the Rings*, but these tend to be incidental and scattered³. There is little sense of Tolkien's developing a serious and increasingly focused

³ Among some of the religious observations: Renowned Tolkien scholar, Tim Shippey, states: "I discuss this in my book, but I can only say that there is *almost no* allusion to Christianity anywhere in *The Lord of the Rings*, and nearly everyone misses what there is (dates, as much as anything). Peter Kreeft, Jean Chausse, and Dr. Phil Ryken recognize the threefold office of priest, prophet, and king, distributed among Frodo, Gandalf and Aragorn. Joseph Pearce states: "Frodo takes up the Ring, the cross, and follows Christ to Golgotha. He's a cross-bearer insofar as he is a ring-bearer. He's a Christ-figure, insofar as he is a cross-bearer." The symbolic impart of Sam's Passion is not recognized by scholars.

Christian theme and bringing it to fulfillment in the climactic scene: the ascent of Mount Doom as a Calvary and the destruction of the Ring as a victory over evil.

My contention in this thesis is that in the entire sweep of the myth Tolkien creates in *The Lord of the Rings*, the Christian story and basic Christian doctrine has a fundamental role to play. I choose here to concentrate on the key figure in thematic development, who is not Frodo—central as he is in the narrative—but rather Frodo’s faithful servant, Samwise Gamgee, or simply, Sam. It is Sam who is bestowed with a transitory spiritual anointing — what the Bible would refer to as the “Spirit of the Lord” — an illumination that suddenly falls upon him at key points in the story, conferring on him a likeness to Jesus Christ, as unacknowledged king, an unexpected prophet, a gardener such as Jesus appeared to be after his resurrection, and above all a suffering servant. Sam is certainly not a cut and paste, simple allegorical Christ figure of the kind to be found in John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. He represents a number of roles of Christ, rather than one, and so is more complex. But Sam is also unlike Bunyan’s figures in that the Christ symbolism settles upon him intermittently. Not, however, less dramatically. Indeed, more so because of this intermittent suddenness. This is especially true of Sam’s sudden illumination to us when he is united with Frodo during the ascent of Mount Doom.

Chapter I

Sam: The Gardener and Servant

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener” (KJV John 15:1).

“Who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Philippians 2:6-7).

The notion that Sam Gamgee, Frodo’s gardener and servant, could personify a Christ figure in *The Lord of the Rings* might seem implausible, given that he often appears comically bumbling and foolish. Indeed, scholars who have discerned the intrinsic religious theme of the work have overlooked Sam in this role entirely.

Christian readers are not agreed on which of three main characters is a figure of Christ. There are three candidates: Frodo, the protagonist and ring bearer; Gandalf, the resurrected prophet; and Aragorn, the returning king. Others cite Jesus’ traditional roles as priest, prophet, and king, and distribute these among Frodo, Gandalf, and Aragorn respectively. But no one considers Sam to be a candidate—not even to reject him as one.

That is perhaps not surprising. After all, hobbits in general are diminutive, marginal, fearful of the outside world, and carelessly preoccupied with food, drink and festivity. Frodo would seem an exception among hobbits, as the protagonist of the story, he is open to adventure and curious about the outside world, much like his

well-travelled Uncle Bilbo. Further, Frodo is an aristocrat among the inhabitants of the Shire, keeping mostly to himself, and separated from the petite bourgeoisie. This division that separates Frodo from the others is illustrated through gossip among the townspeople. Hobbits of the Shire often speculate on the actual value of Frodo's wealth, and are suspicious of his activities and lifestyle. But in the larger world beyond the Shire, Frodo, and the other hobbits are disdainfully referred to as "Halflings" and "Little people."

Among this subordinate race, Sam, as Frodo's gardener and servant, is more subordinate still, and accordingly refers to Frodo as "Master" and "Mr. Frodo." Even in times of fright and peril, Sam maintains his lower rank, as when Frodo falls from a cliff: "Sam heard him and crawled with an effort to the edge. "'Master, master!' He called. 'Master!'" (607). Frodo addresses Sam unceremoniously as his gardener, servant, or simply Sam. In the Bible, Jesus—himself from a despised race—often speaks with total authority, and he is of course a king in the Davidic line. But he is also the suffering servant of Isaiah and emphasizes his role as servant to his disciples by washing their feet (Isa 42:1-12; 49:1-6; 50:4-7; 52:13-53; Jn 13:1-17). My contention is that Tolkien decided to represent Jesus' humble role as a servant in the figure of Sam Gamgee.

In addition to Jesus being often characterized in a gardener's likeness through various parables, but especially when Mary Magdalene mistakes the risen

Christ for the gardener, he is also considered the second Adam - the original gardener. As the apostle Paul stated in his first letter to the church in Corinth: “And so it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit” (1 Cor. 15:45). In *Looking Unto Jesus*, Isaac Ambrose, one of the king's four preachers in Lancashire in 1631, explicates this relationship: “As Adam in the state of grace and innocency, was placed in a garden, and the first office allotted to him was to be a gardener; so Jesus Christ appeared first in a garden, and presents himself in a gardener's likeness: and as that first gardener was the parent of sin, the ruin of mankind, and the author of death; so is this gardener the ransom for our sin; the raiser of our ruins, and the restorer of our life. In some sense, then, and in a mystery, Christ was a gardener” (Ambrose 164). In the final chapter of *The Lord of the Rings* Sam plants a tree that symbolizes the Tree of Life referred to in Genesis and recovered in the twenty-second chapter of the Book of Revelation (Gen 2:9; Rev 22:2). I will discuss the significance of this action in the Afterword.

Sam’s role in the narrative as a faithful servant recalls the role of the servant Jesus takes on in the gospels, most dramatically in John’s gospel when he washed the feet of his disciples, a task typically ascribed to the lowliest of servants of the time (John: 13). In the epistle to the Philippians, Paul underscored Jesus’ adoption of the role of a servant: “Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a

servant, and was made in the likeness of men:” (Phil 2:6-7). No other character in Tolkien’s work shows such Christ-like humility and faithful service than Sam.

What Makes Sam Ordinary Makes Him Special

Why would Tolkien have given such importance to a character who, although loved for his goodness, is often represented as comically rustic? I would assert that it is by a stroke of Tolkien’s ironic genius that he displays Sam in this very manner.

The Book of First Corinthians states: “But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor. 1:27). In portraying Sam as unsophisticated and even, at the outset, foolish, Tolkien was reflecting indirectly on the mission of Jesus, whose life was an example of humility and servitude. All the other admirable characters in *The Lord of the Rings* have distinctive qualities and gifts that set them apart from us as moral examples. But Sam is like all of us—or he starts out like all of us—and his humility is the deepest lesson in *The Lord of the Rings*.

In selecting Sam as a Christ figure, Tolkien parallels a prevalent theme throughout the Bible — that of God working through those persons who are most unassuming and unlikely to accomplish His greatest works. This structure is similarly used by great authors to create powerful character arcs through people who

are initially established as weak or flawed. Humility before God, a powerful sense of unworthiness, is a moral strength in the Old Testament, in contrast with the pride of kings and captains opposed to the nation of Israel. Abraham, though powerful and wealthy, is the obedient servant of God; Joseph's pride is humbled before he rises to great power in Egypt; and Moses, perhaps the greatest figure of all, is the liberator of Israel and the spokesperson for the Law.

The most significant of these figures appears in the first book of Samuel, where we meet a young shepherd boy, regarded as of no importance by his father and brothers, who goes on to slay the Philistine giant Goliath, become the great king of Israel in the line leading to Christ, and, in the psalms, the great poet of faith. At a cursory glance, a comparison between Sam and David appears implausible as David was a great warrior, king, and one whom God professed was a "man after his own heart," and yet the words that God spoke to the prophet Samuel allow another perspective (1 Sam. 13:14). God had commissioned Samuel to choose a king from among the sons of Jesse. Neither Samuel nor Jesse knew which son would be chosen. As Jesse brought forth each of his first seven sons before Samuel, the prophet noticed that the eldest, Eliab, was tall and handsome. Eliab's appearance caused Samuel to silently observe, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord." God's response to Samuel best illustrates why neither Frodo, Gandalf, nor Aragorn — although outwardly appear to be — are true Christ figures: "But the

LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Sam 16:7).

Similarly, we must not look at Sam’s appearance, but at his heart. While he is a diminutive hobbit who does not have the outward appearance of greatness, he more than any other character demonstrates purity of heart through his undying loyalty, self-sacrificial acts, and love for Frodo.

Much like how critics fail to recognize Sam as a Christ figure, David’s own father held his youngest son in such low esteem that he failed to even bring him forth before the prophet Samuel for consideration. A similar lack of regard for David was also held by other family members as evidenced by his brothers. David delivered food to his brothers on the battlefield, where he dared to express his indignation when he heard Goliath’s taunts to the army: “And Eliab his eldest brother heard when he spake unto the men; and Eliab's anger was kindled against David, and he said, Why camest thou down hither? and with whom hast thou left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know thy pride, and the naughtiness of thine heart; for thou art come down that thou mightest see the battle” (1 Sam 17:28).

David demonstrated a self-composed humility even when spoken to derogatorily — a lack of vanity that Sam often exhibits throughout the text in similar situations.

Eliab's disdain for David illuminates the lack of regard and blindness that many in the world have for those who might have greatness within, but are submerged in menial positions. In establishing Sam as a servant, in developing his role as a hero, and ultimately in having him elected mayor of the Shire, Tolkien demonstrates a parallel to the story of David's ascent from shepherd boy to king. Indeed, both began as servants to symbolic ring bearers — Sam to Frodo, and David once a servant to King Saul. Both demonstrated divine grace when each of their individual masters became vexed by evil spirits: Saul hurled spears twice at David, Frodo attacked Sam with hurtful words. Finally, through heroism, trials and tribulations, both David and Sam attained distinction in their latter lives which had no semblance to their beginnings. David's humble beginnings are of course a pattern for the life of Jesus, born obscurely and in poverty.

Sam Remains Sam:

The Transitory Illumination of Sam as a Messianic Figure

Sam is not a clear, allegorical Christ figure like that of C.S. Lewis' Aslan in the *Narnia* novels. Instead, Tolkien intimates and alludes to Sam's Christ-like characteristics in a teasing manner through subtle references that are easily missed, and quickly covered up by Sam's normal and rather clumsy speech and behavior.

While Sam inarguably emerges as a hero in the latter part of *The Lord of the Rings*, the delicate messianic references begin to emerge as early as Chapter Two of the first book. It is here where Gandalf first makes Frodo aware of the diabolical nature of the One Ring. While Frodo and Gandalf, unlike Adam and Eve, have not perpetrated any evil, it nevertheless is at this point where sin enters the garden. It is at this juncture where the idyllic Garden of Eden setting of the Shire becomes, symbolically speaking, Paradise Lost. In one of his letters, Tolkien wrote, “We all long for [Eden] and we are constantly glimpsing it: our whole nature at its best and least corrupted, its gentlest and most human, is still soaked with the sense of exile” (Letters 96). Frodo and Sam exemplify this sentiment as they frequently dream of, and express their longing to be back in the Shire during their journey.

In the Bible, sin enters early in Genesis 3. Adam and Eve were established in a paradisaal setting, tempted by Satan, and ate of the forbidden fruit, whereupon their eyes were opened to their own nakedness and they hid themselves. The sentence directly thereafter states of Adam and Eve: “And they *heard* [emphasis added] the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day” (Genesis 3:8). It is important to note that immediately after the transgression occurred they *heard* God walking in the garden, as similar phrasing will apply to Sam. Gandalf and Frodo *hear* Sam working in the garden immediately after sin is introduced.

The Garden of Eden scene in the Shire unfolds with Frodo and Gandalf sitting by an open window of Frodo's study from which a sublime setting is observed: "A bright fire was on the hearth, but the sun was warm, and the wind was in the South. Everything looked fresh, and the new green on spring was shimmering in the fields and on the tips of the trees' fingers" (46). Having returned from a journey in which he has discovered the evil powers of the One Ring, which was just left to Frodo by Bilbo, Gandalf is about to explain the ring's origin and danger. As he is about to speak, Frodo senses the atmosphere shift and becomes fearfully apprehensive: "Even in the light of the morning he felt the dark shadow of the tidings that Gandalf had brought" (46). Gandalf explains the peril of the One Ring that belongs to the "Dark Power." Arguably the One Ring is a symbol of original sin, the Dark Power representing a Satan-like figure. Sin has entered the Shire. "'How terrifying!' said Frodo. There was another long silence. The *sound* [emphasis added] of Sam Gamgee cutting the lawn came in from the garden" (46).

In an analogous way, Adam and Eve hearing God walking in the garden immediately after the transgression occurs in Eden, parallels Frodo and Gandalf hearing Sam working in the garden immediately after sin is introduced in the Shire. To the reader, Sam appears a bumbling fool at this early stage, yet Tolkien playfully foreshadows how Sam would emerge at the end; one who demonstrates symbolic elements of a Christ figure, a part of the Triune God who was heard in the garden.

Gandalf yanks a spying Sam through the window after he is caught eavesdropping on the conversation about the One Ring. When confronted about what Sam heard, a sputtering Sam replies: “I heard a deal that I didn’t rightly understand, about an enemy, and rings, and Mr. Bilbo sir, and dragons, and a fiery mountain, and - Elves, sir. I listened because I couldn’t help myself, if you know what I mean. Lor’ bless me, sir, but I do love tales of that sort.” Gandalf replies that as punishment for his listening in on the conversation, Sam will go with Frodo on his journey (63). Sam responds with elation, “‘Me, sir!’ cried Sam, springing up like a dog invited for a walk. ‘Me go and see Elves and all! Hooray!’ he shouted, and then burst into tears” (63). Sam appears here to live up to his name of origin, Samwise. Tolkien wrote that Sam was not short for Samuel, but for Samwise: Old English for “Half-wit” (Letters, 72). Even Gollum, a demonically possessed creature who speaks in the plural of himself, and whose mind has been destroyed by the ring, which he calls “my precious,” considers Sam’s intellect below his own. At Shelob’s Lair, Sam, when defending Frodo, gets in a tussle with Gollum: “Fury at the treachery, and desperation at the delay when his master was in deadly peril gave to Sam a sudden violence and strength that was far beyond anything that Gollum had expected from this slow stupid hobbit, as he thought him” (725). Although Gollum was once a hobbit himself, he underestimates Sam — as do many readers.

Sam's witless demeanor would render one hard-pressed to recognize in him any likeness to Christ. His appearance belies the emerging critical role he will play in the story, and the heroism that enables him to single-handedly combat a number of monstrous creatures to protect Frodo's life. The "half-wit" hobbit transcends into a mighty warrior wielding a sword when battling Shelob; "'Now come, you filth!' He cried. 'You've hurt my master, you brute, and you will pay for it. We're going on; but we'll settle with you first. Come on and taste it again!'"(730). Furthermore, throughout the journey, when Frodo is hungry, Sam, attempts to find ways to feed him; when Frodo is tired, Sam ensures his rest; and when Frodo emotionally can't go on any further, Sam encourages him to go on with eloquence far surpassing his reputation for being a half-wit.

It's like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo. The ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were. And sometimes you didn't want to know the end. Because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened? But in the end, it's only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines it will shine out the clearer. Those were the stories that stayed with you. That meant something, even

if you were too small to understand why. But I think, Mr. Frodo, I do understand. I know now. Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn't. They kept going, because they were holding on to something. That there is some good in this world, and it's worth fighting for. (719)

Sam's evolution into a heroic character is slow and subtle. Hints of a divine supernatural power facilitating his transformation occur incrementally throughout the text, and may be traced back as early as the time when Frodo, Sam, and the hobbits first begin their quest and stumble upon the company of Gildor and a group of elves. The hobbits dine and camp together with the elves for a night. There is an angelic milieu to the encounter as Tolkien describes the evening: "Pippin afterwards recalled little of either food or drink, for his mind was filled with the light upon the elf-faces, and the sound of voices so various and so beautiful that he felt in a waking dream" and of Sam, "Sam could never describe in words, nor picture clearly to himself, what he felt or thought that night, though it remained in his memory as one of the chief events of his life" (82).

After the enchanted evening, Frodo and the hobbits wake up in the morning to find the elves have departed, but have left them food and drink.

Frodo is surprised to learn that while he and the hobbits were sleeping, Sam has been up speaking with the elves through the night. As Sam had been overjoyed at the thought of meeting elves, Frodo asks Sam how he feels about elves after meeting them and upon “closer view.” Sam’s articulate response is suddenly different from his normal gibberish, and Frodo is taken aback. Sam replies:

They seem a bit above my likes and dislikes, so to speak,’ answered Sam slowly. ‘It don’t seem to matter what I think about them. They are quite different from what I expected - so old and young, and so gay and sad, as it were.’” Frodo looked at Sam rather startled, half expecting to see some outward sign of the odd change that seemed to have come over him. It did not sound like the voice of the old Sam Gamgee that he thought he knew. But it looked like the old Sam Gamgee sitting there, except that his face was unusually thoughtful. (67)

Here we witness Sam’s outer transfiguration through Frodo’s eyes. Sam allows us to also witness his internal transfiguration through an insightful description of his emotional state:

Yes, sir. I don't know how to say it, but after last night I feel different. I seem to see ahead, in a kind of way. I know we are going to take a very long road, into darkness; but I know I can't turn back. It isn't to see Elves now, nor dragons, nor mountains, that I want - I don't rightly know what I want: but I have something to do before the end, and it lies ahead, not in the Shire. I must see it through, sir, if you understand me. Frodo replies: I don't altogether. But I understand that Gandalf chose me a good companion. (67)

The combination of the angelic descriptors of the elves, and the spiritual transformation in Sam, are symbolic of Christian baptism by the Holy Spirit: a consecration distinct from the customarily recognized water baptism. References to baptism in the Holy Spirit are found in several scriptures. In the Book of Acts, Jesus prepares his disciples: "John baptized with water but, not many days from now, you are going to be baptized with the Holy Spirit." (Act 1:5). In addition, those who receive the Holy Spirit will be empowered with supernatural gifts. Jesus describes: "It is not for you to know times or dates that the Father has decided by his own authority, but you will receive the power of the Holy Spirit which will come on you, and then you will be

my witnesses not only in Jerusalem, but throughout Judaea and Samaria, and indeed to earth's remotest end" (Acts 1:8).

How does one recognize the endowment of the Holy Spirit? The Bible lists several gifts that may be bestowed, and from which one will be selected:

Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal. For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; To another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues: But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will. For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. (1 Cor 12:4-12)

We will see that Sam demonstrates a number of these gifts throughout the text.

Looking back at Sam's remarks to Frodo after his evening with the elves, he speaks not only with words of wisdom, but also prophetically: "I seem to see ahead, in a kind of way. I know we are going to take a very long road, into darkness; but I know I can't turn back" (67). Sam will intermittently display other prophetic utterances along the way as the story unfolds. He will also "distinguish between spirits;" a gift referred to in other bible versions as demonstrating "discernment." During their journey, when Gollum is at their side, Sam often tries to warn a credulous Frodo of the evil nature behind Gollum's facade. Sam begs Frodo not to trust Gollum, yet Frodo is naively deceived and rebukes Sam instead.

Sam also often demonstrates the gift of faith, as can be seen in Mordor. Tolkien describes this odious land, the realm of Sauron, in the following way: "Mists curled and smoked from dark and noisome pools. The reek of them hung stifling in the still air. Far away, now almost due south, the mountain-walls of Mordor loomed, like a black bar of rugged clouds floating above a dangerous fog-bound sea" (52). Through despair, Sam glimpses a single star twinkling above the dark clouds of Mordor, and we bear witness to his great faith, and discernment in the following passage: "The beauty of it

smote his heart, as he looked up out of that forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty forever beyond its reach” (922). The elegant passage echoes scripture: “And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it” (John 1:5). The “light” here symbolizes Jesus.

Perhaps two of the most unique gifts of the Holy Spirit mentioned in 1 Corinthians are speaking in tongues, and the interpretation of tongues. Speaking in tongues may be thought of as a prayer in a heavenly dialect whose words are incomprehensible to man. The Bible describes: “For he that speaketh in an unknown tongue speaketh not unto men, but unto God: for no man understandeth him; howbeit in the spirit he speaketh mysteries” (1 Corinthians 14). God bestows the gift of tongues, this speaking in an unknown language, as evidence of receiving the Holy Ghost and in part so that nonbelievers may witness His spirit. (1 Corinthians 14:21-22). Sam will use this prayer language of the heavenly realm when he is in distress.

As Sam is in danger of being killed at Cirith Ungol, he invokes the name “Gilthoniel A Elbereth,” the same name uttered by Frodo, when he is under attack at Weathertop by the Ringwraiths. In Tolkien’s *The Silmarillion*, a work that describes the history of the First Age of Middle-Earth, Gilthoniel

Elbereth (also referred to as Varda, Star-Kindler, and Lady of the Stars), bears a resemblance to the Blessed Mother, the Virgin Mary. Immediately after Sam invokes her name, he begins to speak in tongues, “And then his tongue was loosed and his voice cried in a language which he did not know: ‘A Elbereth Gilthoniel o menial palan-diriel, le nallon si di’nguruthos! A tiro nin, Fanuilos!’” (729). Tolkien had offered the translation of Sam’s prayer in a letter to a reader: “O Elbereth Starkindler from heaven gazing afar, to thee I cry now in the shadow of (the fear of) death! O look towards me, Everwhite!” (Letters 211).

In addition to speaking in tongues at Cirith Ungol, Sam demonstrates the gift of interpreting unknown tongues. However, since Sam is wearing the ring at the time in order to hide from the Orcs, the tongues that he hears have an ungodly origin. As evil is a distorted imitation of that which is holy, Sam understands the tongues of demonic beings, the Orcs. While hiding from them along a cliff, Sam places the ring on his finger and listens: “He heard them both clearly, and he understood what they said. Perhaps the Ring gave understanding of tongues, or simply understanding, especially of the servants of Sauron its maker, so that if he gave heed, he understood and translated the thought to himself” (734). *The Silmarillion* describes a satanic caricature of the triune God consisting of Melkor, Ungoliant, and Sauron. The ring being

symbolic of Satan's temptations, also provides a mockery of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Tolkien alluded to this when he wrote: "Perhaps the Ring gave *understanding of tongues* [emphasis added] or simply understanding, especially of the servants of Sauron its maker, so that if he gave heed, he understood and translated the thought to himself" (734).

Further illustrating the divine providence working in Sam is his encounter at Shelob's lair. Shelob, referred to with the pronoun "she," is a demonic creature in the form of a giant spider. In an act of betrayal, Gollum leads Frodo and Sam to Shelob, in order that she may kill them, and whereby Gollum can recover the ring. Tolkien devotes several paragraphs to the legendarily powerful and evil nature of the ancient spider: "How Shelob came there, flying from ruin, no tale tells, for out of the Dark Years few tales have come. But still she was there, who was there before Sauron, and before the first stone of Barad-dûr; and she served none but herself, drinking the blood of Elves and Men, bloated and grown fat with endless brooding on her feasts, weaving webs of shadow; for all living things were her food, and her vomit darkness" (723). Whereas no man, or any other creature, had ever been able to defeat Shelob, Sam impales her with his sword: "No such anguish had Shelob ever known, or dreamed of knowing, in all her long world of wickedness. Not the doughtiest soldier of old Gondor, nor the most savage

Orc entrapped, had ever thus endured her, or set blade to her beloved flesh” (728). This remarkable feat in many ways parallels young David killing Goliath.

Another subtle biblical allusion is found in Tom Bombadil’s home among the four sleeping hobbits: Frodo, Pippin, Merry, and Sam. In a long passage, Tolkien details nightmares that wake Frodo, Pippin and Merry with fear. Strong winds, water, and fear of drowning, are collectively described in the hobbits’ dreams. The passage ends: “As far as he could remember, Sam slept through the night in a deep content, if logs are contented” (127). No explanation is given as to why Sam sleeps soundly while the other hobbits are frightened by their visions, but the passage suggests the imagery of Jesus asleep in the boat during a windstorm while his disciples were terrified. (Mark 4:37-39). As the biblical story portrays Jesus’ divine identity in his ability to find rest in turmoil which thus sets Him apart from His disciples, Tolkien is offering another clue that Sam is divinely differentiated from the other hobbits in the same way.

Sam is also distinguished from the other hobbits in his role as comforter. A touching scene that conveys the impression of being divinely inspired occurs when Frodo is described sleeping on Sam’s lap. Frodo is exhausted and Sam tells him to rest and he will watch over him. Gollum finds Frodo

sleeping on Sam's lap, and it touches something inside his nearly irredeemable evil character that appears to bring him close to repentance.

Tolkien describes:

And so Gollum found them hours later, when he returned, crawling and creeping down the path out of the gloom ahead. Sam sat propped against the stone, his head dropping sideways and his breathing heavy. In his lap lay Frodo's head, drowned deep in sleep; upon his white forehead lay one of Sam's brown hands, and the other lay softly upon his master's breast. Peace was in both their faces.

Gollum looked at them. A strange expression passed over his lean hungry face. The gleam faded from his eyes, and they went dim and grey, old and tired. A spasm of pain seemed to twist him, and he turned away, peering back up towards the pass, shaking his head, as if engaged in some interior debate. Then he came back, and slowly putting out a trembling hand, very cautiously he touched Frodo's knee - but almost the touch was a caress. For a fleeting moment, could one of the sleepers have seen him,

they would have thought that they beheld an old weary
hobbit, shrunken by the years that had carried him far
beyond his time, beyond friends and kin, and the fields
and streams of youth, an old starved pitiable thing. (714)

Although not directly parallel, the imagery evokes the setting of The Last Supper wherein: “Now there was leaning on Jesus' bosom one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved” (13 John 23). This statement was subsequent to Jesus telling the disciples that one of them would betray Him. Gollum, in a similar fashion to Judas Iscariot, appears devoted to Frodo, refers to him as “Master,” as did the Disciples of Christ, and yet betrays him. Similar to the emotionally evocative passage in the Bible that narrows in on Christ, the beloved disciple, and Judas, the scene in the text concentrates on the emotional essence of the same symbolic characters — Sam, the Christ figure, Frodo, the disciple Christ loved, and Gollum, the betrayer. The classic image of a disciple resting on Jesus during the Last Supper is depicted by a number of celebrated artists — some paintings portray the disciple lying on Jesus’s lap.

As a whole, Sam’s Christlike devotion, faithfulness, and unwillingness to ever leave Frodo’s side, exemplifies what Paul wrote in Romans: “For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor

powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39). However, the culmination of all Christlike allusions, the place where Sam most powerfully emerges as a Christ figure, is Mount Doom. This is also the culminating episode of Tolkien’s epic and in it we find him continually evoking the hill of Golgotha, the place of the skull.

Chapter II

The Place of the Skull: Mount Doom

It was noted at the conclusion of the last chapter that the climax of the final volume of *The Lord of the Rings*, and of the epic as a whole, occurs at Mount Doom. That is the destination of Frodo and Sam's pilgrimage and the place where the quest must be achieved: the destruction of the One Ring and the eradication of Sauron's power. The scene immediately leading up to this event depicts Frodo at the edge of the chasm unable to part with the Ring (945). Grippled by its evil hold, he places the Ring onto his finger instead of throwing it into the lava of the volcanic abyss. Although the Ring renders Frodo invisible, Gollum suddenly appears and attacks him from behind. Frodo and Gollum wrestle for the Ring, and in the struggle Gollum bites off Frodo's ring finger. Giddy in his victory, Gollum loses his balance and plunges into the fiery chasm while gripping the finger and ring, all the while crying out "Precious!" The diabolical power of the Ring is extirpated, and Frodo's mind is released from its malevolent, hypnotic grip. Sam carries Frodo to safety as, behind them, the infernal Mordor falls to ruins.

This narrative and symbology surrounding Mount Doom are perhaps the most illuminating in revealing Sam's role as a hidden messiah, primarily because it is symbolic of Christ bearing the cross at Golgotha. In order to understand

contextually how Sam fulfills this role, we must consider it from three vantage points, two from within Tolkien's imaginative universe and one from the Bible: the wars of Middle Earth, the gods and spirits reigning from the earliest times, and the figuration of Mount Doom as the biblical Calvary. These contexts present us with three questions. First, great battles and wars are raging in Middle-earth during Frodo and Sam's arduous journey: what do they represent? Second, taking account of Tolkien's posthumous but crucial *Silmarillion*, which provides the back-story to *The Lord of the Rings*, how does Tolkien represent the God of Middle-earth, as well as the other spiritual creatures? Third, understanding the One Ring as a symbol of original sin, what is the connection to Christ's sacrifice at Golgotha, and how does it relate to Sam?

Numerous books, publications, and films have interpreted *The Lord of the Rings* to be an allegory of World War I. On the face of it, this interpretation seems reasonable enough because Tolkien did serve in the British Army, fought in the Battle of Somme, and lost close friends in that dreadful conflict. From this perspective, many theorize the One Ring is symbolic of atomic power, and its hold on Frodo symptomatic of wartime post-traumatic stress syndrome. At first glance, the text would appear to support this allegorical view as there are discussion of strategies, regiments, and alliances when describing the wars being waged on Middle-earth. For example: "The passage of Anduin was won by the Enemy.

Farmair was retreating to the wall of the Pelennor, rallying his men to the Causeway Forts; but he was ten times outnumbered” (817). However, Tolkien wholly rejected this widely held reading of his work. In his Forward to the Second Edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien stated: “The real war does not resemble the legendary war in its process or its conclusion” (2). Tolkien further went on to illustrate how the story would have been written had it indeed been an allegory for the war:

If it [WWI] had inspired or directed the development of the legend, then certainly the Ring would have been seized and used against Sauron; he would not have been annihilated but enslaved, and Barad-dûr would not have been destroyed but occupied. Saruman, failing to get possession of the Ring, would in the confusion and treacheries of the time have found in Mordor the missing links in his own researches into Ring-lore, and before long he would have made a Great Ring of his own with which to challenge the self-styled Ruler of Middle-earth. In that conflict both sides would have held hobbits in hatred and contempt: they would not long have survived even as slaves. (2)

So far as considering *The Lord of the Rings* as an allegory specifically of World War I, this passage is decisive. Tolkien is clear. It is another war of far broader scope, an archetypal war against evil, which is the subject of *The Lord of The Rings*. How can we characterize this war?

I would contend that the answer is to be found in the noble language of the Book of Ephesians, in which an archetypal war of cosmic proportions is figured. It is a great spiritual war:

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery

darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (Eph. 6:10-20)

This fight against supernatural evil forces described in Ephesians is commonly referred to by Christian theologians as “Spiritual Warfare.” William Cook defines spiritual warfare as follows: “Spiritual Warfare is a multilevel conflict between good and evil, initiated on the supernatural plane with the prehistoric rebellion of Lucifer, and transferred onto the natural plane with the fall of man. Satan, man’s adversary, continues to deceive and divert people from finding salvation in Jesus Christ, and to harass and hinder Christians through enticement to sin and exploitation of weaknesses” (Cook 2). Further, Cook writes, “Between the Bible’s opening and closing chapter, it depicts a war being fought on a cosmic scale — a war fought between God and the devil. This war is played out both in the spiritual realm and on the earth” (Cook 7). That is certainly the standard Christian view of the significance and shape of the Bible as a whole, and it is certainly how Tolkien understood the Bible. Spiritual warfare against “principalities and powers” is the principal apocalyptic theme of the New Testament, described in this Pauline Epistle and culminating in the Book of Revelation. Behind the Pagan veneer, spiritual warfare is the principal theme of *The Lord of the Rings* as well, arriving at its climactic moment on Mount Doom.

There are two kingdoms referred to in the New Testament (and in the New Testament view of what it calls the ‘Old Testament’) that are unseen by the human eyes, and yet at war — the Kingdom of God, and The Kingdom of Satan (Acts 19:8; Mat 6:10; Mat 12:25-26). Representations of each kingdom are illustrated through the prophets Elisha, and Daniel. Elisha helped his servant witness God’s army when they were surrounded by the army of the Assyrian king. Elisha’s frightened servant had asked what they should do, and Elisha replied, “Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them. And Elisha prayed, and said, Lord, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see. And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha” (2 Kings 6:15-17). From another perspective, the Book of Daniel exposes Satan’s kingdom and principalities while Daniel undertakes a prayer and a fast in response to an alarming apocalyptic vision. After twenty-one days of praying, a messenger from God appears and explains that Daniel’s prayer was heard on the first day, but the messenger was demonically obstructed, and it took twenty-one days of battling the “Prince of the kingdom of Persia,” to reach Daniel (Dan 10:13). The angel further explains that on his return, he will not only have to fight the Prince of Persia, but also the “Prince of Greece”; high ranking demonic beings (Dan 10:20). Inspired by such prophecies, and by the general tone of the Hebrew Scriptures as the war of Israel against cruel, mighty, and demonic opponents,

Tolkien gave focus and consistency to heroic, spiritual warfare in a different mythological idiom, substituting a “northern” heroic saga for warfare of Israel. What the Old Testament lacks, except perhaps in the majestic figure of Moses, the brilliant if brutal one of Joshua, and the romantic one of David, is a powerful and emotional drama of individual struggle as well, and above all of personal sacrifice, things the New Testament provides in the narrative of the Passion. Tolkien’s boldest substitution is the Passion of Mount Doom.

“For we wrestle not with flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.” The battles being fought on Middle-earth are not with flesh and blood alone, but with Orcs, Ringwaiths, Balrogs, Nazgûl, Goblins, and Trolls, creatures *The Silmarillion* identifies in the hierarchy of demonic beings. Sauron and Saruman, the two dark lords, rule these armies of demons from their discrete principalities of Mordor and Isengard. The Fellowship’s journey to Mordor can be seen as a crusade against spiritual wickedness concentrated in the power conferred by the One Ring and the demonic being who seeks to recover it: Sauron. Moreover, the Ring is inscribed with the Elvish Runes which attest to this wickedness: “One ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all, And in the *darkness* [emphasis added] bind them” (50). The plain language of this inscription aligns with spiritual captivity. “Darkness” in the Bible is used to represent separation

from God as exemplified in Ephesians: “For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children light” (Eph 5:8). Darkness also refers to deception, as indicated by the common phrase “to keep in the dark,” and eschatological darkness, symbolizing judgment and perdition. This biblical use of darkness ironically sheds a great deal of light on the Ring’s inscription, and the evil it portends.

Tolkien also casts light into this shadowy realm. He adopts a striking narrative shift to Sauron’s mind in the immediate moments before the ring is cast into Mount Doom. In so doing, Tolkien describes Sauron’s perspective when the ruination of his realm is imminent: “From all his policies and webs of fear and treachery, from all his stratagems and wars his mind shook free; and throughout his realm a tremor ran, his slaves quailed, and his armies halted, and his captains suddenly steerless, bereft of will, wavered and despaired” (946). This war reflects the Kingdom of Satan in a symbolic sense since Sauron is not only the eponymous Lord of the Rings, but he is also described as an angelic being in *The Silmarillion*. Yet, Sauron is not only literally a spiritual being, but also the embodiment of a force of spiritual oppression: As he’s being extinguished, his enemies gain spirit, hope, while conversely, his own demonic hordes lose spirit and fall into despair.

Further, in *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien places Sauron in a mythological pantheon that parallels the Bible. Ilúvatar is the God of all creation, and Melkor

personifies Lucifer/Satan as the rebellious angel that was cast down after his attempt to obtain God's mantle and God's dominion. Sauron, is Melkor's lieutenant, and like Satan was once renowned for his beauty. Like Lucifer, he was consumed by a voracious vanity to be like God, and he simultaneously preyed upon the vanity of others to deceive and enslave them. This war at the heart of Middle-earth is a war that can be seen in the real world. Gandalf illustrates the power of the Ring when Frodo attempts to give it to him: "'No!' cried Gandalf, springing to his feet. 'With that power I should have power too great and terrible. And over me the Ring would gain a power still greater and more deadly.' His eyes flashed and his face was lit as by a fire within. 'Do not tempt me! For I do not wish to become like the Dark Lord himself'" (57). Gandalf's forceful refusal to take the Ring demonstrates that even those who are demonstrably righteous are susceptible to the Ring's corruption.

Concurrent to Sauron's lament when he and the ring were facing imminent destruction, Gollum bites off Frodo's ring finger. This seemingly uncouth gesture can be understood as biblical metaphor: "But if I with the finger of God cast out devils, no doubt the kingdom of God is come upon you" (Luke 11:20). Many theologians translate the "finger of God" as an anthropomorphic expression connoting the spirit of God, but in this case the symbolism is inverted, it is not the finger of God, but the destruction of the finger that casts out the devils. This verse aligns with the theme of spiritual warfare in the work, and Satan's defeat at

Golgotha. As Cook writes, “Satan and demons are not mentioned many times in the Old Testament. From a canonical perspective, however, their work is evident. Satan’s initial attack against humanity takes place in the most idyllic setting humankind has ever known—the garden of Eden—and his decisive defeat will take place on a hill called Golgotha” (Cook 7). Tolkien would certainly have had a more sophisticated, philological and historical understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures than is reflected in this passage. But as a devout Roman Catholic, he would accepted the interpretation in broad outline as the Pauline, Augustinian, and Christian view of the Bible. He uses that view as a structuring principle in *The Lord of the Rings*. In broadest outline, Sauron’s attack begins in Tolkien’s figurative Garden of Eden, The Shire, and his defeat is on Mount Doom, in a scene that juxtaposes the Passion to the apocalyptic destruction of the world.

The battle against the spiritual forces of darkness is further represented by the struggle Frodo endured before the ring was destroyed, and his transformation after the ring is destroyed. Having struggled to Mount Doom and reaching his goal, at the edge of the chasm, Frodo is still unable to part with the Ring: “The light sprang up again, and there on the brink of the chasm, at the very Crack of Doom, stood Frodo, black against the glare, tense, erect, but still as if he had been turned to stone. ‘Master!’ cried Sam. Then Frodo stirred and spoke with a clear voice, indeed with a voice clearer and more powerful than Sam had ever heard him use, and it rose

about the throb and turmoil of Mount Doom, ringing in the roof and walls. ‘I have come,’ he said. ‘But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!’” (945). Frodo places the Ring on his finger, and Gollum knocks down Sam in his haste to get to the Ring. When Sam gets up, he has “blood streaming from his head dripped in his eyes” (946). This image is evocative of Christ with a crown of thorns on his head and blood dripping in his eyes on the cross. Tolkien connects the blood of Sam with the destruction of the Ring, much like the blood of Christ at Golgotha signifies the washing away of sins, and represents salvation (1 John 1:7). After Gollum falls into the abyss with the Ring, Sam carries Frodo away from danger, and witnesses an immediate change in Frodo: “And there was Frodo, pale and worn, and yet himself again; and in his eyes there was peace now, neither strain of will, nor madness, nor any fear” (947). Within this idiom, Frodo’s transfiguration attests to his deliverance from evil.

A great earthquake occurs when the Ring is destroyed, and darkness covers the land, recalling the earthquake and darkness that followed the crucifixion of Christ. Frodo states, “Well, this is the end, Sam Gamgee,” which echoes Christ’s last words on the cross, “Tetelestai” meaning “It is finished” (John 19:30). Christ’s statement signified that He had accomplished His mission and had conquered the kingdom of darkness. Meanwhile as Frodo utters these words, mountains, towers, and walls crash around them. The skies erupt with thunder and lightning, and fire

spews forth from the summit of Doom, displaying the kingdom of darkness in utter defeat. The scene and chapter ends with Frodo recognizing that Gollum played a crucial role in destroying the Ring. Frodo exclaims, “So let us forgive him!” (947). This sentiment calls to mind the integral role Judas played in Christ’s crucifixion, and Christ’s request for absolution of all who betrayed Him when He cried out: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:24).

To fully understand what Tolkien wished to imply by the death of Gollum and the destruction of Mount Doom, we turn now to *The Silmarillion*. In its historical style, cosmogony, exposition, genealogy, and archaic language, *The Silmarillion* resembles the King James Bible. The work predominantly describes the First Age of Middle-earth, and characters are often referred to by multiple names, a practice that adds further complexity to them and to their narratives. Music is a central theme in Ilúvatar’s creation, as the work explains: “There was Eru, the One, who in Arda is called Ilúvatar; and he made first the Ainur, the Holy Ones, that were the offspring of his thought, and they were with him before aught else was made. And he spoke to them, propounding to them themes of music; and they sang before him, and he was glad” (34). Free will plays an integral part of this cosmos: “Then Ilúvatar said to them: ‘Of the theme that I have declared to you, I will now that ye make in harmony together a Great Music. And since I have kindled you with the Flame Imperishable, ye shall show forth your powers in adorning them, each with

his own thoughts and device, if he will” (35). Simply stated, Ilúvatar, a monotheistic god, designs the world as a composition of a divine symphony in harmony with free will, resembling the way God is depicted in the first chapter of Genesis.

The rebellious Melkor despises the exquisite harmony and attempts to disrupt it by taking the form of a discordant note in the celestial music. As a god who grants free will, Ilúvatar allows the discordant note to exist and gather power, but then ultimately harmonizes it by expanding the harmonic range, creating in the process a more resplendent symphony. This is consistent with the God of the Bible ultimately using evil for good: “But as for you, ye thought evil against me; *but* God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive” (Gen 50:20). This great passage in *The Silmarillion* directs us how to read Gollum’s death on Mount Doom. Sam and Frodo are musical elements of Ilúvatar’s symphony; Gollum is the evil, discordant note. In response, Ilúvatar, being the great maestro, raises his baton and integrates the discordant note into the score, thereby creating a magnificent crescendo as Gollum falls into Mount Doom with the Ring, fulfilling the quest he sought to prevent and attaining at last a forgiveness he never wanted.

While the concept of a divine symphony might appear to diverge from the Bible, symphonic imagery abounds in scripture:

Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth: make a loud noise and rejoice, and sing praise. Sing unto the Lord with the harp; and the voice of a psalm. With trumpets and sound of cornet make a joyful noise before the Lord, the King. Let the sea roar, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein. Let the floods clap their hands: let the hills be joyful together. (Psalm 98 4-7)

As Paul exhorts: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Col 5:16). Moreover, the Psalms are referred to by some Christians as a “Symphony of Praise.” But above all, the first chapter of Genesis is musical in its orderly progression, and its accelerating elaborateness and scope, qualities superbly represented in another work Tolkien would have known, Haydn’s great oratorio *The Creation* (1797-98).

Further establishing a religious narrative prior to the climax of Mount Doom, Tolkien describes Frodo and Sam taking a kind of communion along their journey in the form of lembas, Elven wafers. The lembas are given to them by Galadriel, and are meant to spiritually sustain them throughout their journey, as Manna sustained the Israelites during the Exodus (John 6:31). In a letter to a reader, Tolkien acknowledges this understanding of the lembas’ similarity to the Eucharistic wafer:

“I am a Christian (which can be deduced from my stories), and in fact a Roman Catholic. The latter ‘fact’ perhaps cannot be deduced; though one critic (by letter) asserted that the invocations of Elbereth, and the character of Galadriel as directly described (or through the words of Gimli and Sam) were clearly related to devotion to Mary. Another saw in way-bread (lembas) = viaticum and the reference to its feeding the *will* (vol. III, p.213) and being more potent when fasting, a derivation from the Eucharist.” (Letters 213)

As he sits deep in thought, watching over a sleeping Frodo, Sam describes this food for the spirit:

The lembas had a virtue without which they would long ago have lain down to die. It did not satisfy desire, and at times Sam’s mind was filled with the memories of food, and the longing for simple bread and meats. And yet this waybread of the Elves had a potency that increased as travelers relied on it alone and did not mingle it with other foods. It fed the will, and it gave strength to endure, and to

master sinew and limb beyond the measure of mortal kind.

(935)

Just as someone in a state of mortal sin cannot receive the Eucharist, Gollum and the Orcs are repulsed by the Lembas, and despite extreme hunger, Gollum is unable to eat the wafer and spits it out.

As the journey drags on, Sam becomes separated from Frodo, and suffers both physically and spiritually. He is tempted by the ring in a way that parallels the temptation of Christ in the Judaeen wilderness. Just as Sam is suffering from hunger, Jesus had fasted for forty days and was hungry. It was in this condition that Satan endeavored to entice Jesus with power: “Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; And saith unto him, All these things I will give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan...” (Mat 4:8-11). Satan failed to entice the second Adam, Jesus, into sin. If Satan’s offer was credible in that he could indeed deliver the kingdoms of the world to Christ, this would imply that the earth was largely under his, Satan’s, dominion at the time, as Middle-earth is under the rule of Sauron. Jesus’ victory over the Prince of this World foreshadows the decisive victory over him at Golgotha.

The temptation of Jesus in the wilderness of Judea is shadowed by Tolkien in the bleak wilderness of Mordor, where the Ring itself is a demonic presence that entices Sam with visions of power:

Already the Ring tempted him, gnawing at his will and reason. Wild fantasies arose in his mind; and he saw Samwise the Strong, Hero of the Age, striding with a flaming sword across the darkened land, and armies flocking to his call as he marched to the overthrow of Barad-dûr. And then all the clouds rolled away, and the white sun shone, and at his command the vale of Gorgoroth became a garden of flowers and trees and brought forth fruit. He had only to put on the Ring and claim it for his own, and all this could be.

In that hour of trial it was the love of his master that helped most to hold him firm; but also deep down in him lived still unconquered his plain hobbit-sense: he knew in the core of his heart that he was not large enough to bear such burden, even if such visions were not a mere cheat to betray him. The one small garden of a free gardener was all his need and due, not a garden swollen to a realm; his

own hands to use, not the hands of others to command.

(901)

In allowing the reader to be privy to Sam's innermost thoughts during his trial, Tolkien reveals the qualities that overcome evil, qualities unique to Sam in the work. The gardener and servant parallels Jesus through his servant's heart, sacrificial love, and innate humility. These virtues enable Sam to be able to resist the temptation of the Ring when others were incapable.

The Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church describes the relationship of Christ, Adam, and Satan as follows:

Jesus is the new Adam who remained faithful just where the first Adam had given in to temptation. Jesus fulfills Israel's vocation perfectly: in contrast to those who had once provoked God during forty years in the desert, Christ reveals himself as God's Servant, totally obedient to the divine will. In this, Jesus is the devil's conqueror: he "binds the strong man" to take back his plunder. Jesus' victory over the tempter in the desert anticipates victory at the Passion, the supreme act of obedience of his filial love for the Father. (CCC 539)

Similarly, Sam's ability to resist the temptation of the Ring foreshadows his victory over Sauron at Mount Doom.

The Passion of Sam

The apex of Sam's struggle and sacrifice occurs at Mordor, where he suffers in a way that reflects Christ's suffering while bearing the cross at Golgotha. Tolkien describes Sam's agony; "The last stage of their journey to Orodruin came, and it was a torment greater than Sam had ever thought that he could bear. He was in pain, and so parched that he could not longer swallow even a mouthful of food" (939).

Meanwhile, it is day, and yet it is dark and the sky is black; just as it was when darkness overcame Golgotha. "Sam began to wonder if a second darkness had begun and no day would ever reappear" (940). As Frodo is too weak to go on, Sam carries the ring-bearer, and in doing so becomes the sacrificial ring-bearer himself:

He bent over Frodo, rousing him gently. Frodo groaned; but with a great effort of will he staggered up; and then he fell upon his knees again. He raised his eyes with difficulty to the dark slopes of Mount Doom towering about him, and then pitifully he began to crawl forward on his hands. Sam looked at him and wept in his

heart, but no tears came to his dry and stinging eyes. ‘I said I’d carry him, if it broke my back,’ he muttered, ‘and I will!’

‘Come, Mr. Frodo!’ He cried. ‘I can’t carry it for you, but I can carry you and it as well. So up you get! Come on, Mr. Frodo dear! Sam will give you a ride. Just tell him where to go, and he’ll go.’

As Frodo clung upon his back, arms loosely about his neck, legs clasped firmly under his arms, Sam staggered to his feet; and then to his amazement *he felt the burden light* [emphasis added]. (940)

Not only does Sam carrying Frodo stand in metaphorical relation with Christ in bearing the cross, thereby bearing the burden of the sins of humanity, but so too does the *lightening* of Sam’s burden suggest another biblical parallel. By Tolkien mentioning Sam’s light burden, he is referring to Christ’s offering, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy and *my burden is light*”[emphasis added](Mat 11:30).

His back aching from carrying Frodo, Sam attempts to momentarily rest when he appears to be supernaturally summoned; “Suddenly a sense of urgency which he did not understand came to Sam. It was almost as if he had been called: ‘Now, now, or it will be too late!’ He braced himself and got up” (942). Frodo tries to walk, but suffering from the Ring’s evil hold on his mind, he falls to the ground: “Sam knelt by him. Faint, almost inaudibly, he heard Frodo whispering: ‘Help me Sam! Help me, Sam! Hold my hand! I can’t stop it.’ Sam took his master’s hands and laid them together, palm to palm, and kissed them; and then he held them gently between his own (942) Sam placing Frodo’s hands in a position of prayer and kissing them conveys religious ceremony, similar to the Catholic tradition of kissing the priest’s hand as a gesture of reverence for the church. Following this devotion, Sam carries Frodo again, the imagery evoking Christ carrying the cross. “Again he lifted Frodo and drew his hands down to his own breast, letting his master’s legs dangle. Then he bowed his head and struggled off along the climbing road” (942). While one would expect the narrative to reflect the protagonist’s perspective at this critical juncture in the story, that is, the suffering of Frodo the ring-hearer, Tolkien focuses instead on Sam’s struggle and anguish. As the two struggle upwards together, their bodies joined, they appear to be one hero.

As Sam is carrying Frodo, a sudden force hits him, thrusting him forward “tearing the backs of his hands” evoking imagery of Christ hands being nailed to the

cross. (943). It is Gollum, and both Frodo and Gollum wrestle viciously for the Ring. Before Sam can step in to help, he has a divinely inspired vision:

Then suddenly, as before under the eaves of the Emyrn Mail, Sam saw these two rivals with *other vision* [italics added]. A crouching shape, scarcely more than the shadow of a living thing, a creature now wholly ruined and defeated, yet filled with a hideous lust and rage; *and before it stood stern, untouchable now by pity, a figure robed in white, but at its breast it held a wheel of fire. Out of the fire there spoke a commanding voice. Begone, and trouble me no more! If you touch me ever again, you shall be cast yourself into the Fire of Doom* [emphasis added]. The crouching shape backed away, terror in its blinking eyes, and yet at the same time insatiable desire. Then the vision passed and Sam saw Frodo standing, hand on breast, his breath coming in great gasps, and Gollum at his feet, resting on his knees with his wide-splayed hands upon the ground.” (944)

From this short passage we may draw five conclusions: 1) The symbols of the white robe, wheel of fire, and God speaking through fire are biblical. 2) Sam is seeing

what is happening in the invisible realm, and the vision is describing spiritual warfare — God’s kingdom opposing a creature that belongs to Satan’s kingdom. 3) Frodo is seen in a white robe, the color of the cassocks of the most exalted priests, such as the pope. 4) Subsequent to the scene of Sam kissing Frodo’s hand, the imagery of the white robe establishes Frodo as a priest. Scripture explains, “For every high priest taken from among men is appointed for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifice for sins (Heb 5:1). In the Old Testament, high priests represented the people and offered the sacrifice. 5) Sam’s supernatural vision, according to biblical tradition, indicates he is one of God’s chosen.

After Sam’s vision passes, he urgently tells Frodo he must continue to the Crack of Doom, and that he will takeover fighting Gollum: “‘Quick Master!’ He gasped. ‘Go on! Go on! No time to lose. I’ll deal with him. Go on!’” (944). Frodo continues, and Sam draws his sword to slay Gollum once and for all. However, Gollum appeals to Sam’s pity: “‘Don’t kill us,’ he wept. ‘Don’t hurt us with nasty cruel steel! Let us live, yes, live just a little longer. *Lost lost! We’re lost.* And when Precious goes we’ll die, yes, die into the dust’” (944). As Gollum reveals his certain knowledge that his soul is lost, Sam feels empathy, an empathy illumined by grace: “But deep in his heart there was something that restrained him: he could not strike this thing lying in the dust, forlorn, ruinous, utterly wretched. He himself, though

only for a little while, had borne the Ring, and now dimly he guessed the agony of Gollum's shriveled mind and body, enslaved to that Ring, unable to find peace or relief ever in life again" (944). It is Sam's mercy that ultimately allows the Ring to be destroyed as Frodo is unable to carry out the mission.

As Gollum and the Ring are destroyed, Middle-earth rumbles and erupts into a great earthquake paralleling the time of Christ's crucifixion. With Christ's last breath, the veil of the temple was "rent," thus proclaiming the atonement of sin: "And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent" (Mat 27:51). Likewise, as Frodo and Sam flee, Mount Doom is shaken and its rocks are torn open: "Behind them the Mountain was convulsed. Great rents opened in its side. Slow rivers of fire came down the long slopes towards them. Soon they would be engulfed" (950). Frodo and Sam, physically and mentally unable to go on any further, find no way out of the maelstrom, and consider their death impending. But the Great Eagles, Gwaihir, Landroval, and Meneldor, come to their rescue. The eagles are agents of *eucatastrophe* (a sudden and favorable resolution of events), a neologism coined by Tolkien, and a term now included in the Oxford Dictionary. In religious tradition, the eagle soaring upward represents the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ:

And so it was that Gwaihir saw them with his keen
far-seeing eyes, as down the wild wind he came, and

daring the great peril of the skies he circled in the air: two small dark figures, forlorn, hand in hand upon a little hill, while the world shook under them, and gasped, and rivers of fire drew near. And even as he espied them and came swooping down, he saw them fall, worn out, or choked with fumes and heat, or stricken down by despair at last, hiding their eyes from death.

Side by side they lay: and down swept Gwaihir, and down came Landroval and Meneldor the swift; and in a dream, not knowing what fate had befallen them, the wanderers were lifted up and borne far away out of the darkness and the fire. (951)

Tolkien's Allegory

Because my analysis of Mount Doom has revealed a great deal of religious symbolism that relates to Christ's crucifixion, and draws parallels between character and religious themes which could plausibly be interpreted as allegorical, I would be remiss in not addressing Tolkien's views on allegory which I believe may be generally misunderstood. Most authors who write on the various themes of Tolkien's

work will mention his expressed dislike of allegory. The primary basis for this claim is found in the Foreword to the Second Edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, where Tolkien says the following: “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 readers” (2). I believe Tolkien’s assertion must be examined in context. He was explicitly denying popular claims that *The Lord of the Rings* is about World War I. Earlier in this chapter, I recounted a particular passage in which he denies that *The Lord of the Rings* is about World War I. It begins, “This tale grew in the telling, until it became a history of the Great War of the Ring and included many glimpses of the yet more ancient history that preceded it” (2).

Tolkien’s statement, that of dislike for allegory “in all its manifestations” is extreme and obviously defensive. A more nuanced view is expressed in his letters: “I dislike Allegory – the conscious and intentional allegory – yet any attempt to explain the purport of myth or fairytale must use allegorical language. (And, of course, the more 'life' a story has the more readily will it be susceptible of allegorical interpretations: while the better a deliberate allegory is made the more nearly will it be acceptable just as a story.)” (Letters 131). In another letter, Tolkien described yet a further layer of acceptable allegory when he wrote: “Of course, Allegory and Story converge, meeting somewhere in Truth. So that the only perfectly consistent allegory

is a real life; And one finds, even in imperfect human 'literature' that the better and more consistent an allegory is the more easily can it be read 'just as a story'; and the better and more closely woven a story is the more easily can those so minded find allegory in it" (Letters 109). Moreover, Tolkien himself acknowledged that there is an allegorical, Christian element to *The Lord of the Rings* when he wrote to Father Robert Murray: "*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously at first, but consciously in the revision" (Letters 142). Tolkien's subtle and well crafted use of biblical allegory succeeds in tying together the richly detailed mythological world of Middle-earth with compelling biblical themes that confer a spiritual resonance and dramatic depth to the tale. The story remains the story, but Christian themes add a numinous and transcendental element that gives the epic a yet more profound meaning.

Conclusion

Tolkien's presentation of the character of Samwise Gamgee as a Christ figure in *The Lord of the Rings* develops like a symphonic theme: often the theme is faint, heard in the background, but sometimes it comes forward to command our attention. Tolkien teases the theme out in the beginning with a few tinkling notes: Sam is introduced in a very subtle and slightly comical reflection of how God is heard in the

garden of Eden after Eve and Adam have sinned. As the quest proceeds, Sam meets a group of elves who bestow gifts on him that are evocative of the Holy Spirit. But at this stage Sam's messianic symbolism has yet to emerge as a clear, recognizable theme. Even so, the theme becomes more evident, as if other instruments were taking it up and the tempo increased. Still further along the journey, as Sam becomes more eloquent and his spiritual depth more apparent, the theme is heard in several registers. A climax is attained on the threshold of Mordor when Sam battles Shelob, a demonic being who has slaughtered thousands over millennia. The ordinary Sam, the Hobbit we saw at the outset, would have faced certain death in this contest. But imbued with the strength of a spiritual anointing, he slays the mighty demon with his sword, as Jesus cast out demons with the "sword of the spirit" (Eph 6:17). It is here we begin to recognize Sam as a divinely inspired individual on a heroic mission to defeat evil on Middle-earth. As Sam bears the burden of sin on his final quest to defeat evil, the world of Middle-earth resonates in full harmony with the emotional power of the biblical Passion. At last, the theme of Sam as Savior is fully proclaimed as a realized theme. The heavens of Middle-earth crack, thunderously revealing—although only in this moment, as if a veil were drawn back—that the humblest of figures in Tolkien's narrative is the savior of Middle Earth.

Afterword

As *The Lord of the Rings* parallels the Bible in its beginning — where sin enters the Garden of Eden setting of The Shire — so too does it come to a close in a scene that evokes God’s paradisaal garden as described in the Book of Revelation. The author of Revelation is careful to transfer the Tree of Life of Genesis to the Heavenly city at the end of time: “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God” (Rev 2:7; cf. Gen. 2:8, 22). We have seen how at the outset of *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien alludes to the Shire as the paradise of Genesis; and Sam’s being heard working in the garden is intended to recall God being heard walking the garden after the Fall. This latter allusion is supported in the final chapter of *The Lord of the Rings* where Tolkien depicts Sam planting a magnificent tree which evokes the Tree of Life. Here is how the tree appears in Revelation: “In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month, and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations” (Rev. 22:2).

Tolkien names Sam’s tree a “Mallorn”: “It was indeed a *mallorn*, and it was the wonder of the neighborhood. In after years, it grew in grace and beauty, it was

known far and wide and people would come long journeys to see it (1023). Genesis describes how the Tree of Life was planted by God: “And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good food; the *tree of life* [emphasis added] also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil” (Gen 2:9). As a Roman Catholic, Tolkien sees the Creator of Genesis, and the planter of the Tree of Life, as the Son, not the Father. This is indeed standard for all Christian interpretations of Genesis, based on the opening of the Gospel According to John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). The Son, who will become incarnate as Jesus, is the gardener of the Tree of Life, making it reasonable for Tolkien to extend this symbolism to Sam. And although the First Adam brought forth destruction through the Tree of Good and Evil, Sam, the Second Adam here, restores the garden in the form of the Tree of Life, a restoration that follows the symbolism of Revelation, where the trees of Eden grow in the heavenly city, their leaves healing the nations: “So Sam planted saplings in all the places where specially beautiful or beloved trees had been destroyed, and he put a grain of the precious dust in the soil at the root of each” (1023).

In the last pages of *The Lord of the Rings* the narrative focus shifts from Frodo to Sam, who with his final words brings the epic to a close. Sam walks through the door of his family home, takes a deep breath, and simply states: “Well,

I'm back" (1032). Of course this has a literal meaning — Sam is home after a long journey, but it also reflects a deeper symbolic meaning that highlights his return as an ordinary mortal after fulfilling his divine role as a transitory vessel of the Godhead. This symbolism is consonant with biblical tropes of spiritual anointing. The Bible regularly refers to this anointing as the "Spirit of the Lord": "And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD" (Isa 11:2). This Spirit is both explicitly referenced, and expressed through many of the heroes in the Bible, some of whom performed miraculous feats, such as through Moses during the parting of the Red Sea; Samson, when he was imbued with supernatural strength; and the "Spirit of the Lord came upon David" when he was anointed king. (Ex 14:21; Jud 14:6; 1 Sam 16:13). We also see the spirit departing, for example: "the Spirit of the LORD departed Saul" (1 Sam 16:14). A young David displayed an awareness of this Spirit when he stood against Goliath, knowing God was with him (1 Sam 17:45). Sam's Goliath comes in the form of the epic beast Shelob.

Furthermore, Sam carries out the three roles of Christ, as priest, prophet, and king, which other critics have ascribed to Frodo, Gandalf, and Aragorn, respectively. While many of these associations have validity, and some are all but transparent, Tolkien's special regard for Sam, amounting to a distinct emotional investment in

this character, is more nuanced and mysterious, and of course given the close of the work, it is also more final. Sam, is decidedly inconspicuous in the role. He is easily mistaken for being simply the gardener. But in a striking biblical scene, Mary Magdalene mistook Jesus for a gardener (John 20:15).

Sam shadows the offices of priest, prophet, and king in three ways. First, as Sam carries Frodo up Mount Doom, he becomes a sacrificial ring bearer himself. Through Sam's unity with Frodo they meld into one on the ascent, and together become a seamless Christ figure. Along the journey until this point, Sam appeared to be at Frodo's side as his servant, however, the narrative unexpectedly shifts dramatically, and we experience Mount Doom from Sam's point of view. Sam is suddenly the leading character in this drama, and Frodo the supporting, while they bear the burden of the Ring as one. Sam bleeds as if from an imaginary crown of thorns, and Frodo paraphrases Christ's words on the cross.

Second, Sam fulfills the office of prophet, as he becomes prophetic after the anointing of the Holy Spirit, and receives visions. Tolkien clearly associates Sam with Samuel,⁴ the biblical prophet. A young Samuel first heard God's voice when he was asleep, and woke up thinking it was his sleeping master, Eli, who spoke (1Sam 3). Similarly, Sam and Frodo are asleep when Sam wakes up believing he hears his

⁴ Perhaps these links were also consideration in naming the character 'Samwise.' Indeed, the biblical name Samuel stands out in a sea of Nordic mythical style names that permeate the text.

master Frodo calling him, and yet Frodo is still asleep (632). Here, the call is a divine warning as Sam wakes up to hear Gollum plotting against him and Frodo.

Third, Sam fulfills the office of king through his likeness to David. As I have described several similarities between Sam and David in Chapter One, Sam spiritually reflects David, the greatest king of Israel, and to whose descendants God promised eternal kingship: “He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son” (2 Sam 7:13-14). Christ was a descendant of the paternal Davidic line. The connections between David and Jesus are referred to in multiple books in the Bible, beginning with the opening of Matthew’s gospel.

The Lord of the Rings remains a timeless fantasy epic having very wide and enduring popularity. Indeed, the trilogy has been recognized as the greatest book of the twentieth century.⁵ Countless literary critics have sought to unveil the hidden meaning of the work. But Tolkien concerned himself with only one critic not found among mere mortals. As he wrote to C.S. Lewis: “The only just literary critic is Christ, who admires more than does any man the gifts He Himself has bestowed” (Letters 113). The statement is an amusing and endearing insight into the author’s religious devotion and his impatience with reductive interpretations of his work. Indeed, Tolkien’s friend, Clyde S. Kilby, pointed out that Tolkien: “did not

⁵ Voted by Waterstones—the largest book chain in Britain, among others.

want his things interpreted as allegorical; but of course in his great, beautiful inconsistency, he did write an article and say, ‘I don’t see why people don’t see God in my stories’” (Ryken 44). I would certainly not meet Tolkien’s definition of a “just literary critic,” which means he will countenance no literary criticism whatsoever. But at least I see what Tolkien says his readers should see as plainly as anything else: that God is in this story. He is woven into a tapestry of divine providence, of spiritual gifts, and of the grace of which Sam is the pervasive and often invisible thread. Defeating evil through humility, unconditional love, dedication, loyalty, self-sacrifice and suffering—suffering, if necessary, unto death—Sam alone resists the temptation of the Ring.⁶ Among all the characters of Tolkien’s vast saga, he alone is the one without sin.

⁶ Characters such as Lady Galadriel and Gandalf avoid the ring rather than resist it because they understand that they would be corrupted by its power. When Frodo tells Galadriel, “I will give you the One Ring, if you ask for it. It is too great a matter for me.” She responds, “In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow upon the Mountain! Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair!” (365). While Galadriel and Gandalf possess noble virtues, what distinguishes and allows Sam to be able to wear the ring and yet resist its temptation, is his most profound Christlike quality: the purity of his soul.

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