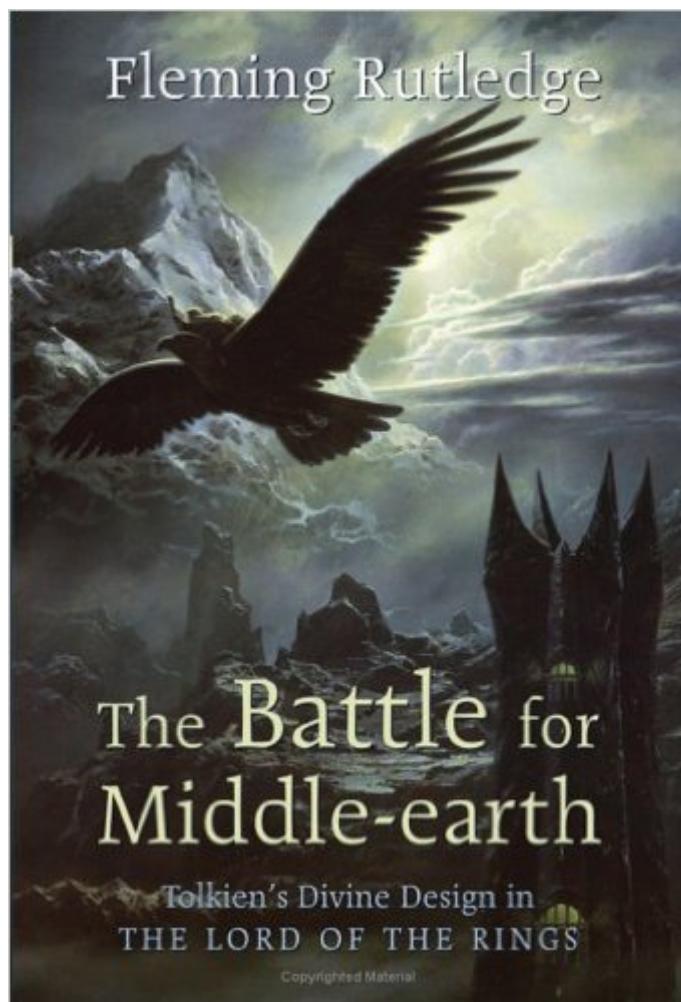


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The Battle For Middle-earth: Tolkien's Divine Design In The Lord Of The Rings



Synopsis

J. R. R. Tolkien's 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

Prospective readers who are hesitating because of the theological tones of the title should stop worrying. Look beyond the author's name (which some of you may recognize as an Episcopalian priest and pretty well-known speaker) and the title indicating it will discuss Tolkien's "Divine Design". No matter what faith you do or do not profess, you cannot escape the fact that faith and scripture

were very important to Tolkien himself. If you are interested in how it influenced him as a writer, read this book. Rutledge has succeeded where few other books about Tolkien have: she presents the underlying grand themes of LOTR in a consistent, coherent and convincing manner. She makes the argument well, that Tolkien understood his work as theological at core, and that there is a continuous theological underpinning to the story. She calls this the "deep narrative", and throughout her book, she is consistently able to draw parallels between the surface narrative (the story) and the deeper theological one. This is not to say that she at any time makes LOTR an "allegory" per se. LOTR is not, and was not intended by the author to be, a retelling of the Gospel story. LOTR is a stand-alone story, and can be read and enjoyed by anyone just by itself. In fact, the vast majority of us, who came to this story when teenagers or younger, loved the book from the moment we read it. It called something out of our souls, perhaps, and we understood something about the "deep narrative" simply by reading the story. The great gift of Tolkien is his ability to show us core truth about humanity this way, by storytelling. Nevertheless, his devout Catholic Christianity and understanding of the influence of sin on all, underpins his story.

This is a frustrating book because it is well worth reading - and perhaps could have been a classic of Tolkien criticism; but for the fact that the author's self-indulgence introduced so many jarring and embarrassing anomalous elements. The basic theme is very strong, and the line of argument about how divine providence or fate permeates Tolkien's world (and his world view) is extremely well argued. But the author gives the impression of being one of those people who likes the sound of her own voice and airing her passing opinions. So the book is too long, and the superb insights concerning the underlying religious theme of Lord of the Rings are swamped by mere chit chat, or are padded out with other very dubious, trivial or idiosyncratic Christian parallels to the Tolkien. The very striking and brilliant points, of which there are many, need to be mined out from the dross. Worst of all, the book was written in the early 2000s during the throes of Bush-Derangement Syndrome (BDR) - in which 'reality' for a female US Episcopalian priest comes filtered through the distorting lens of the New York Times and National Public Radio - which are treated here as having quasi-Biblical authority. From her repeated use of example, she really seems to believe that the USA under George W Bush, the response to 9/11 and the behaviour of the US/UK allies in the Iraq war, is a reasonable routine comparison with Sauron and Saruman, and with the temptations and moral failings of the heroes. By contrast, Liberals, Democrats and their like are exempted from any except positive mention. The political partisanship is truly stunning, and indeed strikes me as pathological.

Although I haven't finished this book by Fleming Rutledge, I think it's going to be one of my favorites. The title is The Battle for Middle-earth: Tolkien's Divine Design in The Lord of the Rings. Here is some background to her approach, in the author's own words: Tolkien did not intend his story to be about Good vs. Evil with clearly defined boundaries. It is significant that in his letters he often puts "good" in quotation marks as if to say "supposedly" good. The book is about the way that evil (understood as power over others) has the capacity to insinuate its way into the hearts and souls of absolutely everyone. Not even Gandalf is immune. That, for me, is the greatness and the subtlety of [LOTR]. My own conviction is that the theological structure of the book (what I call the "deep narrative") pervades the entire work and is subtly disclosed by Tolkien by [his use] of the passive form of the verb in sentences ("Frodo was meant" to have the Ring) and the frequent references to "some other will." The observant reader will gradually come to feel an overpowering sense of the presence of God, or - in an honored theological term now unfortunately less used - Providence. Tolkien uses the passive the way the Bible does, to indicate the active, shaping presence of God ("their eyes were opened," "the rocks were split").* Tolkien calls God Eru, "The One," or Ilvatar, "Father of All." In his own words, the One "intrudes the finger of God" into the plot at various identifiable points. It is this One whom Tolkien calls The Writer of the Story, quoting with obvious approval the words of a reviewer who referred to "that one ever-present person who is never absent and never named.

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