

The Holy Fellowship: Holiness in *The Lord of the Rings*

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Before diving into this theological treatment of *The Lord of the Rings* I want to clarify that an argument for allegory is in no way, shape, or form being made here. The aim of this article is to shine a light on the theological implications of patience and holiness in the quest of the Fellowship, which have been directly influenced by Tolkien's Catholicism. Ralph C. Wood is helpful here, "A...far more serious complaint against Tolkien's Christian interpreters is that we are wrong to find any traces of the gospel in his book, since it contains no formal religion... Yet there is a deeper reason for Tolkien's omission of formal religion from his book. He makes the mythical world of Middle-earth non-religious, among other reasons, in order that we might see Christianity reflected in it more clearly if also indirectly." He then quotes from Tolkien's Letters, "The religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism."¹ It is my hope that this interpretation assists the reader in painting a more complete picture of who J.R.R. Tolkien was and to determine the value of his writings in order to improve the life of the reader of Tolkien, to encourage her to continually pursue the Good, which is the shared aim of Christianity and the members of the Fellowship.

Throughout history, patience has been considered one of the highest virtues. Extending as far back as the earliest recorded writings of religion and human civilization, it continues to establish its place among modern virtues. In J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* the manifestation of patience is veiled throughout all three parts. It is not simply a literary theme that runs through Tolkien's writings, but it is evident that patience is a virtue that Tolkien held in high esteem. Patience ripples throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, and his other works such as *Leaf by Niggle*, Tolkien's pseudo-autobiographical short story. Tolkien writes, "He used to spend a long time on a single leaf, trying to catch its shape, and its sheen, and the glistening of dew drops on its edges. Yet he wanted to paint a whole tree, with all of its leaves in the same style, and all of them different."² This kind of patience is implicitly related to Tolkien's Orthodox Christian influence and is a key component to understanding *The Lord of the Rings* as a whole.

The most profound student of patience throughout the story is the hobbit, Frodo Baggins. The reader learns early on in *The Fellowship of the Ring* that Frodo is ready to jump into adventure at a moment's notice. Bilbo informs Gandalf after his eleventieth birthday party, "He would come with me, of course, if I asked him. In fact he offered once, just before the party." Readers can relate to Frodo in a similar matter: human beings are eager to run after the next big thing in this life, longing for something to mix up the

everyday routine. Initially this kind of longing is harmless, but it can cause one to get in the way of their true identity. Bilbo continues his observation of Frodo, "But he does not really want to, yet. I want to see the wild country again before I die, and the Mountains; but he is still in love with the Shire, with woods and fields and little rivers. He ought to be comfortable here."³ Bilbo speaks of contentment, even in his own yearning to travel the outside world once more before he dies. A love for home is the primary value for the hobbits of the Shire as well as for all of the good inhabitants of Middle-earth, to live in humility, in smallness. It is this true nature that puts Frodo in touch with his patient side.

It is patience that drives Frodo to continually face the challenges on his journey, and it is patience that ultimately wins the day for the Fellowship. Turning to a biblical understanding of patience as Paul explains it and what is required to be a person of high moral standards (Gal. 5:22), is a key to unlocking the holy life. The ancient Greek for patience is *markothumia* (μακροθυμία). The modern English translation of "patience" does not give full merit to the characteristics of the virtue that Paul explicates upon. While "patience" can leave a bland impression, its content will shine a light onto the progression of Frodo and what Tolkien held to be of extreme importance in approaching Fantasy while also applying to everyday living. In Gerhard Kittel's mammoth *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* he gives insight into what Paul meant by patience, "*markothumia* can never imply irresolution on the part of God, as though he could decide only after a period of waiting... God's patience does not overlook anything. It simply sees further than man. It has the end view. It has the true insight which knows best."⁴ It is this surrender to the oversight of the Good in *The Lord of the Rings* that brings all things together and to their fullness. A perfect example is the discourse between Frodo and Gandalf after Frodo confesses his desire for Gollum's death when Bilbo first encountered the creature, "Pity? It was pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need." Gandalf's wisdom never falls short: "Many that live deserve death. And many that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement. For even the very wise cannot see all ends. I have not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it. And he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many—yours at least."⁵ Gandalf's wise insight into the patient person serves the dual purpose of lesson and foreshadow. Frodo surrenders himself to the will of the good

and finds the patience to pity Gollum and in the end it is the shared pity of Frodo and Bilbo that determines the fate of the Ring and Middle-earth. Frodo extends his gaze beyond himself which in turn aligns him with his true Self.

While holiness embodies a different meaning than patience, they are two sides of the same coin and must be examined together. This is especially the case in observing where the friends of the Fellowship begin and where they ultimately arrive. In similar fashion to approaching Frodo's transformation, a surveillance of Aragorn's personal development shall be in order. Holiness from a biblical understanding is a philosophical way of being and a way of acting. Returning to Tolkien's Catholicism, holiness as understood by Tolkien and absorbed from him by the Fellowship is rooted in the Old Testament. The biblical-Hebrew term for "holy" is the word *qodesh* (קֹדֶשׁ), which translates "to be separated." William Greathouse, a holiness scholar, explicates, "It is here that the ethical aspect becomes dominant. It is essentially a personal concept and becomes the basis for the prophetic call to the ethical requirements of [a] covenant."⁶ It is this separateness that sets Aragorn and the remaining members of the Fellowship apart from many of the other noble warriors of Middle-earth, through their vow to destroy the One Ring. Even when Boromir fails to live up to the moral requirements laid upon him at the birth of the Fellowship, Aragorn exemplifies his commitment to ethical duty:

"Farewell, Aragorn! Go to Minas Tirith and save my people! I have failed."
 'No!' said Aragorn, taking his hand and kissing his brow. 'You have conquered. Few have gained such a victory. Be at peace! Minas Tirith shall not fail!' Boromir smiled."⁷

When someone of righteous character carries out a holy act it holds the potential for contagious and redemptive qualities.

Holiness is not a stagnant reality, however. It is a state of being in which its practitioner is continually reoriented towards the will of the Good despite oneself. Aragorn, among his companions, has every right to dismiss his allegiance to the quest under the shadow of frustration and hopelessness. But it is his undying commitment to the Good that keeps Aragorn steadfast, while at the same time inspiring others to endure hardships in light of hope. It is an awesome quality to possess. Greathouse lays out an all-encompassing definition of holiness, "(1) Awefulness, plenitude of power that evokes dread and a sense of divine wrath; (2) overpoweringness, plenitude of being, absolute unapproachableness; (3) urgency, vitality, will, force, movement, excitement, activity, energy that the mystic experiences as 'consuming fire;' (4) being: the "Wholly Other," different, in a category separate to himself, transcendent, supernatural; and (5) compelling, fascinating, giving rise to spiritual intoxication, rapture, and exaltation."⁸ Throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, Aragorn reveals himself to be terrible, powerful, and pure all at the same time. For example:

Aragorn and Eomer's charge on the wildmen rammers in the Battle of Helm's Deep allowed for the men of the Mark to reinforce the iron gate and Aragorn's speech at the Battle at the Black Gate inspired those who had left their hope with the corpses that scattered the fields of Pellenor to give themselves on behalf of a diminishing hope. It is this sacrifice on behalf of this small hope that embodies the ultimate Good in Middle-earth. This comes to its climax in the coronation of Aragorn as King. Aragorn goes on to articulate the custom of the loremasters: that the new king receives the crown from the former king or goes alone to take it from the tomb of his forefather. Putting self-glorifying tradition aside, Aragorn tasks Faramir to fetch the crown. He goes a step further and requests to receive the crown from Frodo



and to be crowned by Gandalf, who he humbly admits that if it were not for their loyalty, he would not have a crown to place on his brow nor a kingdom to rule. This is what the patient person looks like; this is the essence of holiness.

What makes the perseverance of Frodo and the consistent honor of Aragorn so intriguing is their quality of looking beyond themselves. The illusion of power plagued the minds of many a good people of Middle-earth. It is the false promise of long life through the avenue of self-righteousness that drives Isildur to keep the Ring rather than destroy it, and what twists Smeagol into the creature Gollum. Self-righteousness is the highest form of sin in Middle-earth, not for the sake of being a sin, but because it promises something it cannot provide. In fact, it deceives the supposed beneficiary to their demise. The Ring betrays Isildur and takes his life, and it seduces Smeagol from who he was born to be. When one gives into self-lust its effects are immediate. It rushes the person to act on behalf of their own gain, and to do everything necessary to attain greatness. It is much like

looking into a “fun mirror” at a fair or circus. One’s stature becomes taller or skinnier when peering into the mirror, but the longer one stares into their false reflection the opposite effect begins to infect the viewer. The image projected in the mirror increases the desired stature, but the inactivity of the true self infects the individual with laziness and isolation because of their obsessive fixation on a picture of themselves that does not even exist. This fixation is what Shadow thrives on and it is its antithesis that I will now turn to.

Patience and holiness go hand-in-hand when attempting to understand Tolkien’s values as a Catholic man and author, and their presence in *The Lord of the Rings* as a whole. As these two sides of the coin have been touched on, I will now present the coin itself: humility or smallness. While holiness and patience take part in comprising humility, it is humility itself that encompasses the entirety of *The Lord of the Rings*, the legendarium of Middle-earth, and Tolkien’s writings. While the Ring falsely promises power, humility continually brings the individual closer to herself, humanity, and the world. It invites the Good to fill up one’s life and guide them to righteousness. Brother David Steindl-Rast states it in this manner, “to be humble means simply to be earthy. . . . If we accept and embrace the earthiness of our human condition we shall find ourselves doing so with humble pride. In our best moments humility is simply pride that is too grateful to look down on anyone.”⁹ When one is able to embrace humility they are able to embrace what it means to be human. It is what makes Gandalf so wise and Aragorn so worthy of praise, because they deny that these attributes arise out of any individual ambition. Rather, they flower from the desire to surrender to the will of the Good.

Tolkien addressed humility with utmost importance. It was his consistent desire to apply smallness to every aspect of his life, especially in regards to Middle-earth and fantasy. The Professor emphasizes its importance in his essay *On Fairy-Stories*, “He who would enter into the Kingdom of

Faërie should have the heart of a little child. For that possession is necessary to all high adventure, into kingdoms both less and greater than Faërie. But humility and innocence—these things ‘the heart of a child’ must mean in such a context—do not necessarily imply an uncritical wonder, nor indeed an uncritical tenderness.”¹⁰ Humility is the key to entering our humanness and the Kingdom of Faërie. To be humble is to surrender to the Good and live to our fullest capacity. As we continue to read Tolkien and persevere through life’s journey, may we approach them both with the heart of a child.

Notes

1. Wood, Ralph C. "Introduction." *The Gospel According to Tolkien: Visions of the Kingdom in Middle-earth*. 1st ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003. Pp. 3-4. Print.
2. Tolkien, J.R.R. "Leaf by Niggle." *The Tolkien Reader: Stories, Poems and Commentary by the Author "The Hobbit" and "The Lord of the Rings"* 1st ed. New York City: Ballantine, 1977. Pg. 88. Print.
3. Tolkien, J.R.R. "The Long-Expected Party." *The Fellowship of the Ring* 1st ed. New York City: Ballantine, 1976. Pp. 58-59. Print.
4. Kittel, Gerhard, ed. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Vol. 4. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973. Pg. 382. Print.
5. Tolkien. "The Shadow of the Past." *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Pp. 92-93.
6. Greathouse, William M. "Holiness in the Old Testament." *Wholeness in Christ: Toward a Biblical Theology of Holiness*. Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1998. Pg. 17. Print.
7. Tolkien, J.R.R. "The Departure of Boromir." *The Two Towers* 1st ed. New York City: Ballantine, 1976. Pg. 18. Print.
8. Greathouse. Pg. 15.
9. Steindl-Rast, Brother David. "Fullness and Emptiness." *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*. Mahwah: Paulist, 1984. Pp. 202-203. Print.
10. Tolkien. "On Fairy-Stories." *The Tolkien Reader*. Pg. 43.

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Letters to the Editor

I'm writing to thank you for the excellent issue of Mallorn, and to offer my whole-hearted support for your plans for its development.

Sue

Dear Ms. Haddon,

Congratulations for your work on Mallorn, the articles I have read so far were very interesting.

Eduardo

Dear Ro,

Well, what a wonderful edition of Mallorn, so professionally put together and also with excellent articles...I was particularly drawn to Tolkien's first notebook and the excellent piece by Logan Quigley. The cover was particularly bold and maybe some might find untypical, but I loved it. In my opinion this is what being a member of the TS is about, but I am profoundly aware that many disagree with me. Do carry on the good work and well done.

Mick