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J. R. Tolkien: Theologian in Disguise?

Small is Powerful: a Guiding Principle of *The Lord of the Rings*

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Keywords: *Weak, fool, choice/chosen, providence, wise/wisdom.*

I A Strange Hero

Small is powerful; so thought Tolkien, so thinks God. If there is one scene from *Lord of the Rings* that encapsulates this principle, consider this one: At a critical point in the saga, just as Frodo, the hobbit or halfling is about to enter the territory of Sauron the Dark Lord where the Ring can be destroyed, he pauses, deep in thought. Mindful of Gandalf, the good wizard and the leader of the Fellowship of the Ring, whom he thinks he will see no more, he searches in his mind for any direction that may have been given for this crucial part of his mission. Nothing; and as he thought about it he concluded that Gandalf had never been in the dark realm since the power of the Dark Lord had come to its fullness. Thus, he reflects: 'And here he was, a little halfling from the Shire, a simple hobbit of the quiet countryside, expected to find a way where the great ones could not go, or dared not go. It was an evil fate.'[1]

Tolkien, in the depiction of his small hero, has him here expressing his despair while articulating the amazing role for which he has been chosen. Frodo's despair heightens the crucial nature of the operating principle: he is far too weak and inadequate for the task. He admits to having taken it upon himself, but at this point it was obviously an evil choice. Once more he must choose, and both of the paths before him appeared to lead to terror and death. He cannot do it, but he must

1 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring: The Lord of the Rings Part 1* (London: Harper Collins reset ed., repr. 1999), 2.4.3.310. All references here to *The Lord of the Rings* will be to this 3 vol. edition, and will be abbreviated as Part, Book, Chapter, page, e.g. *LoR*, 2.4.3.310.

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make the attempt and die in so doing.

He thinks he has been given a task that is utterly beyond him, a judgement which was both right and wrong. It was a task he had not sought, a burden he had not wanted, but he had been chosen by the consensus of the wise who had ears for the wisdom of the past, and eyes for the workings of providence in their own times. They were as surprised as Frodo at the choice, but acknowledged that however inadequate he appeared, this most unlikely being was unmistakably the one among them to be trusted with the assignment.

II A Strange Author

Strange? Who on earth would write a story like this? Most likely, it would be someone who was conversant with the ways of God as revealed in the Bible, someone who thought theologically about life as being fundamentally religious. In Tolkien's Foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, he has gone on record, concerning his remarkable epic fantasy, declaring that, 'as for any inner meaning or "message", it has in the intention of the author none'.[2] There he also asserted his dislike of allegory, so we must take note that he did not intend to write a Christian allegory. He indicated that readers will make of the epic what they may, but for him it was simply a story.

That may mean that this writer is voicing only his own response to the tale. On the other hand, there is little doubt that a particular world-view is expressed in Tolkien's great work, perhaps subconsciously, but present as the very fabric of his grand epic. This he admitted in a letter in 1953, acknowledging that his literary creation was fundamentally religious, but that 'the religious element is absorbed into the story and symbolism'.[3]

What then do we find in this work of fantasy besides a good read? We find this: a world where, in the conflict between the forces of good and evil, it is the weakest and smallest beings who carry the day against the strong. *The Lord of the Rings* is about the passion for power, which is portrayed as the ultimate evil, an evil so destructive that not only does it poison its environment, but also inevitably destroys those who would seize and embrace it, or rather, who are embraced by it. It is both ironic and perceptive that the weakest of the beings who people this story should be the key instruments through which the fall of the mighty bastions of evil is accomplished.

The passion for power is epitomised in the One Ring around which the story revolves. The Ring had been forged in a former age along with others that by the time of the setting of this story had been destroyed, neutralised, or possessed by the Dark Lord, Sauron. Possession of this master instrument of power unleashes the worst aspects of this passion in those who seek to own and use it. The passion for power, along with the jealousy, hate, suspicion, deceit, anger, ruthlessness, and the contempt for compassion and mercy that it spawns, rises in intensity

2 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring: The Lord of the Rings Part 1*, xvii.

3 Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien (eds), The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, 142, 1953 (London: Allen & Unwin 1981).

over time to poison all relationships. Even those entrusted with the Ring in order to destroy it, in spite of a simple integrity that fitted them for the task, find it a burden that sets up an inner conflict which would tear them apart and shorten their existence.

Such was it with Frodo Baggins, the hobbit, the halfling, who was chosen to carry the Ring in order to destroy it in the smoking Cracks of Doom in the Fire-mountain in Mordor, the realm of the Black Lord. Called away from the Shire of Middle-earth where the hobbits tilled the ground and went about their lives in peace, contentment and simplicity, Frodo found the Ring to be a burden that sapped his energy, wore away his strength, and at times distressed and even skewed his spirit.

Therefore, in the initial phases of his mission, Frodo was provided with companions, the Fellowship of the Ring. This Fellowship was comprised of three other hobbits, Sam Gamgee, Peregrin (Pippin) Took, and Meriadoc (Merry) Brandybuck, plus Gandalf the wise wizard, Legolas the elf, and Gimli the dwarf. Completing the band were representatives of the best of men, Boromir, a prince of the Stewards of Gondor, and Aragorn, the last of the descendants of the line of the great kings of Gondor, but working incognito against the Dark Lord as a Ranger. These companions, a mixture of simplicity, integrity, wisdom, supernatural powers, extraordinary skill, exceptional courage, human greatness, and loyal equals, served their purpose in the initial conflicts, sharing their wisdom and their strengths.

When the fellowship divided as Frodo and Sam left to face their onerous task of taking the Ring to its place of destruction, the others would play their parts in events elsewhere to participate in the final triumph. The decisive critical stroke was left to Frodo, the Ring-bearer, and his faithful friend Sam. In the end it was to be as Gandalf had long since predicted, 'Many are the strange chances of the world', said Mithrandir (Gandalf), 'and help oft comes from the hands of the weak when the Wise falter.'[4]

III A Strange Principle

This observation echoes a familiar biblical principle, enunciated by the apostle Paul in the context of his message of the apparent foolishness of the Cross, in relation to the Corinthian church:

> But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose things that are low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. (1 Cor. 1:27).

This principle populates the history of salvation: Joseph, the youngest of the sons of Jacob, hated by his brothers and sold by them into servitude in Egypt, becomes the saviour of his people (Gen. 37-45, esp. 45:4-8). Gideon, self-confessed as the least member of the weakest clan of the tribe of Manasseh, is chosen by God to lead his people, with a force cut down by God

4 J.R.R. Tolkien, 'Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age' in *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: Allen & Unwin 1977, repr.1979), 363.

to three hundred warriors, to a mighty victory over the oppressing Midianites and Amalekites who 'lay along the valley, as thick as locusts; and their camels were without number, countless as the sand on the seashore' (Judg. 7:12).

David, the younger son of Jesse's seven sons is chosen by God through the prophet Samuel, to replace Saul as king. David with his slingshot and stones slays Goliath the dreaded Philistine champion who with 'the shaft of his spear like a weaver's beam' (1 Sam.17:7), put such fear into all the Israelite warriors that they fled. Saul remarked of David when he volunteered to fight Goliath that he was 'just a boy', and the writer noted that David was disdained by Goliath because he was 'only a youth' (1 Sam. 17: 33, 42). Saul, himself, had been chosen by God for kingly office when he was humble and unassuming (1 Sam. 9:21).

Jeremiah pleads his youth, inexperience, and his inability to speak when called by God to become a prophet to the nations (Jer. 1: 6). Amos, a God-chosen prophet to Israel, answers the pagan priest of Bethel with the startling fact that he, Amos, was no professional prophet, but only a herdsman and a farmer who had been entrusted with a specific word from God for the Northern Kingdom, Israel (Amos 8:5).

An undistinguished maiden from Gentile-infected Galilee is chosen to be the bearer of the Jew's Messiah, a lowliness which she celebrates in her beautiful song (Lk. 1:46-55). The placement of Jesus in Nazareth, deliberately made by God, brings forth from the guileless Nathanael, soon to become a dedicated disciple of Jesus, the remark, 'Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?' (Jn. 1:46). God had sidestepped the centres of power and authority, Caesarea and Jerusalem, for a town which was more than one hundred kilometres away from the mainstream of Roman political and Jewish religious significance in which to nurture the Messiah for his first thirty years.

To commence his ministry, Jesus chose to move from South Galilee to the North, to Capernaum, in 'Galilee of the Gentiles' (Mt. 4:12-17), even more distasteful to the strict custodians of Judaism. At the start of Jesus' public ministry he is introduced by John Baptist, as 'the Lamb of God', a remarkable image to describe the long expected mighty deliverer.

Many have noted that God bypassed the great, and the mighty, and those considered wise in this world in the choice of the twelve apostles of Jesus. A few fishermen, a hated tax-collector for the Romans, and a revolutionary zealot, made up at least half the number. No priests, Pharisees, scribes, or religious experts of any kind made up the group, and yet, these 'uneducated and ordinary men' (Acts 4:13) became the touchstone of Christian faith and doctrine.

The apostle Paul, as a converted Pharisee, was a seeming exception to the principle. It should not escape us that as Saul of Tarsus, Paul took the role of a beast in his savage persecution of the infant church. His surprise encounter with the risen Christ, the Jesus he was pursuing through the Christian disciples, reduced him to submission and, at first, to impotence and blindness. Thus, though one of the 'not many wise, powerful or noble' included in the calling of God, his initial humiliation was indicative of what he was to learn, experience, and then to

teach as an ambassador of Christ. He was prepared to sacrifice his impressive ancestry and accomplishments to follow Christ (Phil. 3:4-11).

He describes himself, not as a captain, but as a prisoner in Christ's triumphal procession (2 Cor. 2:14). He glories, not in his strengths, but in his weaknesses and in the apparent weak weapons of victorious spiritual warfare depicted in 2 Corinthians 10:1-5. After cataloguing his various trials and sufferings in 2 Corinthians 11, he spells out the working principle by which he lived and laboured, the word he received from God: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness' (2 Cor. 12:5-10). He would eventually write of Jesus that, 'He was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power' (2 Cor. 13:4), having already told the Corinthians that 'the message of the Cross is foolishness to those who are perishing . . . we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. . . for God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.' (1 Cor. 1: 18-25).

It seems evident that Tolkien had absorbed this critical aspect of the Christian world-view, and that he had incorporated it into the heart of his epic fantasy. Tolkien captures the weakness of his chosen vessels in a section after they had negotiated the vile Passage of the Dead Marshes. Frodo and Sam, now at the edge of the dreaded land of Mordor where their destination, the Mount of Fire was located, were overwhelmed by the environmental devastation that lay before them:

> The light broadened and hardened. The gasping pits and poisonous mounds grew hideously clear. The sun was up, walking among clouds and long flags of smoke, but even the sunlight was defiled. The hobbits had no welcome for that light, unfriendly it seemed, revealing them in their helplessness—little squeaking ghosts that wandered among the ash-heaps of the Dark Lord.[5]

'Little squeaking ghosts' they were, merely figures without size or substance, unable to make even a coherent statement, let alone accomplish the mammoth task assigned to them. They were as ghosts that wandered, as though they had little heart or focus for the serious business committed to them. Discovered by the dawning sun in their helplessness, they seemed totally unsuitable to face the grim challenge before them. Surely, a mistake has been made. Who could ever have chosen such weak vessels for so great a mission, one upon which the destiny of the inhabitants of Middle Earth depended? As noted above, Frodo certainly thought that was the case.

Tolkien not only puts this sentiment on the lips of the main instrument of deliverance, but also on those who thought themselves wise in the lore and wisdom of this world. The note of the foolishness in the choice of a hobbit for the great task is sounded by Denethor II, the Lord of the city of Minis Tirith, the knowledgeable but proud and deceitful Ruling Steward of Gondor. He thought that his son, Boromir, had accompanied Frodo into the land of the Dark Lord. In an exchange of opinions with Gandalf, who did not

5 *LoR*, 2.4.2.294.

trust him, Denethor responded that his own wisdom was,

> Enough to perceive that there are two follies to avoid. To use this thing [the Ring] is perilous. At this hour, to send it in the hands of a witless halfling into the land of the Enemy himself, as you have done, and this son of mine [Boromir], that is madness.[6]

It is crucial to observe that Denethor's younger son, Faramir, had already thrown the responsibility back on his father, pointing out that it was his father's choice that had sent Boromir on the fateful errand that brought him into the Fellowship of the Ring. Denethor could only respond, 'Stir not the bitterness in the cup that I have mixed for myself.'[7] What a confession of the failure of his wisdom as distorted by his jealousy of the influence of Gandalf. This was allied with a perverted favouritism for his elder son, and with an arrogant selfishness that excluded everyone who did not exclusively serve his own interests.

It is implicit that Denethor's wisdom was, to use his own words against him, 'witless'. Wisdom, if it is to be authentic, must be accompanied by humility, impartiality, and a love that reaches out to encompass those beyond its own immediate circle of concern. Otherwise, it cannot discern the ways of true wisdom, that is the thoughts and ways of God. It is obvious from Tolkien's characterisation that he was well versed in the biblical principle of the way of true wisdom.

Whilst Frodo and Sam are pressing toward the goal of their task, the disposal of the Ring, elsewhere the other hobbits are demonstrating the same principle in their spheres of this heroic contest against the forces of evil. Merry had ridden, though forbidden by King Theoden, Lord of the Mark, with the disguised King's daughter, Eowyn, into battle against the troops of Sauron led by the Black Captain, the Witch-King, a Ringwraith or ghost, mounted on a giant bird-like creature. Theoden's horse, killed by the Black Captain, fell upon the King crushing life out of him.

The winged creature with its Black Rider lighted on the King's horse, but was withstood, to the Black Rider's utter amazement, by Eowyn. The creature leapt down upon her, only to have its head severed from its body by her skilful sword. In fierce rage, the Black Captain shattered Eowyn's shield with his mace. He stood over her to wield the fatal blow. Merry, with his special sword, acted quickly to pierce the sinew of the knee of the Black Captain, thus 'breaking the spell that knit his unseen sinews to his will'.[8] The Black Captain, now with the vital link between his earthly body and his corrupted soul deactivated, melted into the wind as a bodiless spectre when Eowyn dealt the final blow.

A woman and a hobbit, neither of whom ought to have been present on this battlefield, had brought about the demise of the chief of the spiritual beings, the Black Riders, whose threatening presence had hung over the Fellowship of the Ring from its very beginning. Who had accomplished this impossible feat? – not a wizard, not a

6 *LoR*, 3.5.4.92.

7 *LoR*, 3.5.4.91.

8 *LoR*, 3.5.6.130.

famous warrior, not an elf or a dwarf, not any other being with special power–simply a woman and a halfling, the latter being one whom the Black Rider 'heeded no more than a worm in the mud'.[9] The principle holds.

Pippin, too, plays his part. Denethor had given up hope when Sauron's troops attacked Minas Tirith. In despair he built a pyre on which to burn his wounded son Faramir in company with himself. Pippin vigorously opposed him, but being unheeded, he then found Gandalf to effect the deliverance of Faramir in the nick of time.

Also, not only weakness but foolishness is taken into account by Tolkien. After the fall of Isengard and the defeat and humiliation of the corrupted White Wizard, Saruman, Pippin had sneaked a look into the Palantir, the magic Stone by which Saruman had kept in touch with Sauron. It had hurtful consequences for Pippin, including a scolding from Gandalf. But then, Gandalf recognized that Pippin's rash foolishness was probably a stroke of fortune. 'Maybe, I have been saved by this hobbit from a grave blunder. I had considered whether or not to probe this Stone myself to find its uses.'[10] Thereby he would have revealed himself to Sauron, a trial for which he felt unready and could well have been disastrous for the mission.

Five days later Gandalf learned from Denethor that Sauron had moved prematurely with his plans. As Gandalf thought on this he realised that this resulted from Pippin's foolish action of looking into the Stone, after which it had been given to its true owner, Aragorn, the heir of Isuldir and thus the king of Gondor. Gandalf rightly guessed that Aragorn had used the Stone to challenge the Dark Lord and that this was to their advantage. It had turned the eyes of the Dark Lord away from Mordor at the very time Frodo and Sam were approaching their goal. Gandalf turns to Pippin, 'Maybe...maybe even your foolishness helped, my lad.'[11]

Thus all four hobbits played their special parts in the overcoming of the evil shadow that spread its pernicious grasp over the land. Strength had been made perfect in weakness, or even more to the point, in the foolishness of weakness.

IV The Wisdom of the Strange Choice

The choice of a witless halfling, to use Denethor's words, is basic to the story. Here is a choice that cannot be plumbed, certainly not by the wisdom of this world, whether based upon history or lore as in the story, or upon supernatural powers such as belonging to wizards and elves as in this epic tale. Tolkien makes it clear that the possession of exceptional wisdom, supernatural insight, and special powers are insufficient to overcome the power of the Ring and its evil maker, the Dark Lord.

At the beginning of the story, the good wizard, Gandalf, tells Frodo the truth about the Ring and his responsibility to destroy it. Frodo becomes upset, protests and suggests that Gan-

9 *LoR*, 3.5.6.129.

10 *LoR*, 2.3.11.244.

11 *LoR*, 3.5.4.94.

dalf should embrace the task. Gandalf vehemently refuses, asserting that the Ring would gain deadly power over him and turn him into a Dark Lord: 'I dare not take it, even to keep it safe, unused. The wish to wield it would be too great for my strength.'[12] Gandalf needed to be free of it to fight it and to help Frodo destroy it. In this way, he confesses the power of the dark side, and the inherent weakness of his own considerable strength.

This, as Frodo had suggested, is amazing; Gandalf appeared very much more qualified than a hobbit for this task. Why then was he, the much weaker vessel, chosen? Gandalf tells him that there is no answer to that, but one thing he may be sure about is that it was not for any merit, power or wisdom that he possessed more than any other being. Indeed, he was lacking all the features that would fit someone for the task: special wisdom, physical stature, great strength, and magical powers.

The gathering at Rivendell of the personnel from various populaces chose Frodo as the one who was to be bearer of the Ring to the Mountain of Doom. Elrond Halfelven, Lord of Rivendell, who presided at this gathering, voicing his wonder at what was happening, remarked to Frodo: 'I think this task is appointed to you–who of all the Wise could have foreseen it?'[13] Was this not then foolishness, that such a choice had been made? So it would seem, but this is the essence of the principle. Yes, Frodo should use to the utmost all the abilities native to him, but even under normal circumstances these would fall far short.

Boromir, who had questioned the decision at the Council, echoed this sentiment with eyes blazing and mad with anger when at Parth Galen where the Fellowship was split up for a time, and where Boromir was killed by a company of Sauron's Orcs. There, under the influence of the power of the Ring which he desired to take from Frodo, he said: 'The only plan that is proposed to us is that a halfling should walk blindly into Mordor and offer the Enemy every chance of recapturing it for himself.' Resisted by Frodo, he shouted: 'Folly! Fool! Obstinate fool!'[14] There was indeed no logical reason why there should be any different outcome in the immense task that lay ahead of the hobbit. Indeed, the task was far beyond his personal resources and was obviously headed for failure.

All this sounds an evangelical note. As noted above, this principle wends its way through Holy Scripture as the bedrock of God's dealings with humankind. This indicates how wrong we got it in the first instance as shown in Genesis 3 in its depiction of the devastating consequences of the grasp for wisdom and power independent of the Creator. The last book of the New Testament, Revelation, is in essence a theology of power. What figure do we see standing as the pinnacle of power in the visions of John? A Lamb! (Rev. 5:6ff.). How are the enemies overcome? By a Lamb! (Rev. 17:13-14). The contrast of the Lamb with the beast who is the peak of evil dominion is patently obvious (Rev. 13-14).

12 *LoR*, 1.1.2.81.

13 *LoR*, 1.2.2.355.

14 *LoR*, 1.2.10.524.

In the final outcome, who but the Lamb is revealed as the heart and glory of the New Jerusalem? (Rev. 21:22-27). Power and triumph is vested in the one who bears this beautiful metaphor of weakness, the Lamb of God, the one who laid aside his greatness to be crucified through weakness.

Thus, while there is no answer to the wherefore of the Divine choice, there is a compelling inner logic in God's ways. Universal agreement among Christians is found on this issue: it is not for any surplus of merit, power or wisdom more than any other person that the Divine choice is made. Only the blindness of pride would allow us to say otherwise. In the matter of salvation and in the fulfilment of any divine commission, the underlying cause and power is the grace of God concretely applied by the Holy Spirit. Although that is not explicit in Tolkien's work, the principle is woven into the fabric of the story. Let us hear Elrond again:

> This quest may be attempted by the weak with as much hope as the strong. Yet such is oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world: small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere…I think that this task is appointed for you, Frodo; and that if you do not find a way, no one will. This is the hour of the Shire-folk, when they arise from their quiet fields to shake the towers and counsels of the great. Who of all the Wise could have foreseen it? Or if they are wise, why should they expect to know it, until the hour has struck?[15]

Another instance of Tolkien's embodiment of this principle in the coalition against the Black Lord occurs the morning after the triumph of Eowyn and Merry. A war council of the lords that had lent their strength to the battle met outside the walls of Minas Tirith. Gandalf counselled advance under the leadership of Aragorn, now acknowledged as the King of Gondor. Aragorn laid out his strategy, proposing it not as a command but as a choice. All present vowed their allegiance to Aragorn, and then their agreement with the details of the plan of action, a perilous venture that could bring death to many and probable defeat to the alliance. When they had reckoned up their strength, Prince Imrahil, Prince of Dol Amroth, burst into laughter, saying:

> Surely…this is the greatest jest in all the history of Gondor: that we should ride with seven thousands, scarce as many as the vanguard of its army in the days of its power, to assail the mountain and the impenetrable gate of the Black Land! So might a child threaten a mail-clad knight with a bow of string and green willow.[16]

Once again, the task is allotted to the weak to confound the strong. So off they set with little better than children's toys to the final battle: to enter the stronghold of Mordor and overcome the Dark Lord. Madness, some would say. Yes, as mad as the mention by Jesus of his forthcoming death in Jerusalem seemed to Peter who had only just confessed Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, the long-expected, all-powerful deliverer of the Jews (Mt. 16:13-23).

15 *LoR*, 1.2.2.353.

16 *LoR*, 3.5.9.182.

But Peter was as unaware of the basic principle that Jesus embodied (Mt. 16:24-26), although he himself was living testimony to it, as were the majority of those who are depicted by Tolkien in their march upon Mordor. If there is anything to be learned from Tolkien's epic, it is that in the economy of God small is powerful, simply because its bearers are aware of their weaknesses and limitations. They have no other choice than to depend upon Divine providence. Therein lies the fullness of wisdom.

V Conclusion

The last word comes from the small tract with which these musings began, 'Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age', concerning the final battle that saw the demise of Sauron:

> In that last battle were Mithrandir (Gandalf), and the sons of Elrond, and the King of Rohan, and lords of Gondor, and the Heir of Isildur with the Dúnedain of the North. There at the last they looked upon death and defeat, and all their valour was in vain; for Sauron was too strong. Yet in that hour was put to proof that which Mithrandir had spoken, and help came at the hands of the weak when the Wise faltered. For, as many songs have since sung, it was the Periannath, the Little People, dwellers in hillsides and meadows, who brought them deliverance.[17]

Tolkien thus enunciates a principle that not only lies at the heart of his story, but also at the heart of God's story, a principle that has its richest and most powerful application and enunciation in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, 'who was crucified in weakness but lives by God's power'(2 Cor:13:4). Hidden in that Cross was the paradoxical omnipotent weakness which provided and released deliverance, redemption, forgiveness, spiritual power, and eternal life to a world in darkness, conflict, and desperate need, as those who are committed to the Lord Jesus have found. As for Tolkien, there is much in the way of entertainment to be gained from him. More so, we can learn much from him about the ways of God.

17 Tolkien,'Of the Rings of Power', 366.