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9-22-2022

Of Trees and Rings: A Reflection on The Rings of Power

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Recommended Citation

Clark, T. J. (2022). Of Trees and Rings: A Reflection on The Rings of Power. Retrieved from https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/1411

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Of Trees and Rings: A Reflection on The Rings of Power

Abstract

"Living in a world as complex as this present age presents a series of choices of mixed moral clarity."

Posting about the Amazon series *The Rings of Power* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/of-trees-and-rings-a-reflection-on-the-rings-of-power/>

Keywords

In All Things, television series review, The Rings of Power, J. A. Bayona

Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt University.

Of Trees and Rings: A Reflection on *The Rings of Power*

Tom Clark

September 22, 2022

This summer I removed a majestic 50+ year old ash tree from our front yard that had succumbed to the emerald ash borer. It was a difficult decision to make because the tree shaded much of our yard and my children delighted in the rope swing that hung from its boughs. Perhaps this was weighing on my mind as I watched the opening minutes of the new Amazon series *The Rings of Power*, seeing the light of the two majestic trees in Valinor extinguished by Morgoth.

I suspect that most readers either know exactly what is referred to here and have seen it themselves, or they have only a vague notion that a prequel to J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* was recently released. This reflection aims to spark further interest for the former, and to the latter give a reason why they might consider immersing themselves in the world of Middle-Earth. The Peter Jackson film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*, now 20 years old, is widely admired and highly recommended for those who have not yet seen it. *The Rings of Power* is similarly beautiful on the screen, with intricate sets and meticulous CGI. The sound and music are equally powerful here as in the Oscar winning Jackson films. The visuals in this series have been crafted with care, but will the story deliver too?

To briefly review, at the core of *The Lord of the Rings* is the ring of power, which Frodo must destroy by casting it in the fires of Mount Doom deep in the heart of enemy territory in Mordor. This singular act will cause Sauron's defeat once and for all. Because the ring was not destroyed at Sauron's first defeat, he was able to rise to power once again. *The Rings of Power* takes place long before this, and explores the world of Middle-earth and the tale of how Sauron's ring of power was first forged. The Tolkien lore masters among us know all this, for they have already read all of Tolkien's collected writings, but most know little of this earlier legendarium.

To see what this show offers I present one scene from episode 3, with some very mild spoilers. Here a group of elves and humans have been taken captive and enslaved by a group of orcs. They are chained and forced to dig long trenches through the countryside so the orcs can stay hidden below ground, else the sun scorch their foul skin. Eventually the prisoners reach a mammoth tree which blocks the way, its roots preventing further progress. The elves are told to hew down the tree, but refuse, for the tree is majestic and their love of trees is core to them, almost a religious belief – "it has earned its place here".

One elf is cut down for his refusal, and the orcs threaten to kill another, so a third, tears in his eyes, assents to cutting down the tree.

This scene alone makes the series worthy of watching, as it brings to the forefront the question of how one acts in the face of certain evil. Do you refuse, and subsequently offer your life for the sake of your principles, or do you participate in a small evil to prevent a greater evil, the further death of your kin? What is the value of a life? This same question is at the heart of Shūsaku Endō's classic text *Silence*, where Jesuit priests are given the choice of trample on a fumi-e, a carved image of Christ, and effectively renounce their Faith, or watch as their converts are tortured and killed before their eyes. The interconnection of "texts" is fascinating, and is a key reason why art is so powerful.¹ As we consider multiple stories asking the same questions, we reflect on how we might fare in such circumstances.

Some Tolkien "purists" suggest that *The Rings of Power* has veered too far from the source material; however, scenes like this one suggest otherwise. The tears of lament remind me of other classics such as *Binsey Poplars* by Gerard Manley Hopkins. Tolkien would have known Hopkins poetry well and perhaps had lines such as these in mind when he wrote of trees being destroyed:

My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled,
Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,
All felled, felled, are all felled; ...
O if we but knew what we do
When we delve or hew--
Hack and rack the growing green!

Imagine what Hopkins would have written had he seen the destruction of trees and the digging of trenches as Tolkien did during his service in World War 1. Certainly, this experience influenced Tolkien's work, as did his Catholic Faith; in concert these influences drew out of him tales of the long defeat, of small victories, yes, but ones that lead to a new age of less glory than the prior one. On screen *The Rings of Power* displays the beauty of what once was, undimmed before the breaking of the world. Recalling the ruins that are left in *The Lord of the Rings*, the viewer joins a long story, and through it can reflect on their own stories and the various parts they play.

Living in a world as complex as this present age presents a series of choices of mixed moral clarity. As Gandalf says to Frodo, "All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us." Perhaps planting a new tree in the vacant hole, where the giant ash tree once was, is itself an act of hope that will in time grow to bring about some new beauty.

1. The interested reader may find the recent film adaptation also worth watching.