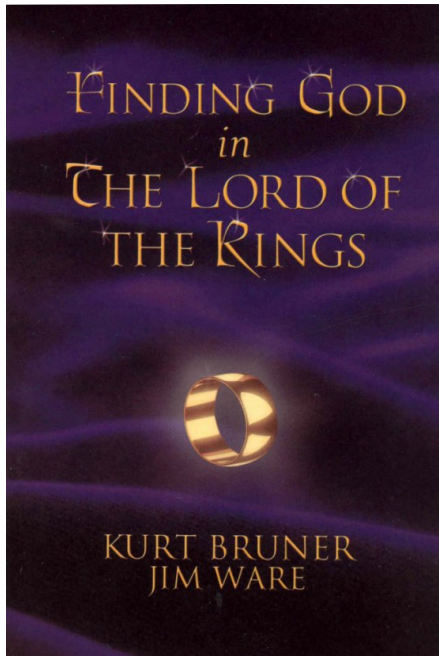

Media Spotlight Book Review



Finding God in the Lord of the Rings

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HARRY AND FRODO?

Authored by Kurt Bruner & Jim Ware - Reviewed by Albert James Dager

When I first saw this small book in a Christian bookstore I was put off by the suggestion that God is somehow hidden within a writing of the nature of *The Lord of the Rings*. My misgivings were not without justification.

The authors have stretched their imaginations beyond limits to make the granddaddy of all sword and sorcery fantasies read like the Gospels. The great epic of "good vs. evil" has been "magically" transformed into a parallel of the good news of redemption.

This book is largely the work of Kurt Bruner, who considers J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis two of his literary heroes. He had gone to Oxford "to celebrate two Christian men whose writings have impacted the faith and imaginations of millions." With the release of the movie, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, based on the first novel in the Ring trilogy, Bruner and Ware apparently saw an opportunity to capitalize on the renewed interest in Tolkien, and give us their perceptions of how his writing is really a cloak for spreading the Gospel to fans of the fantasy genre.

The authors' glowing accounts of how Tolkien's faith inspired and informed his imagination is a reach. Tolkien, like Lewis, denied that his fantasies had anything to do with his beliefs. In fact, Bruner admits this:

We do not claim to know the mind of J. R. R. Tolkien beyond

what he chose to share with us through letters and other writings. It is unlikely that he had these or any other reflections in mind as he penned his epic. In fact, I would be surprised if he gave any thought at all to how the themes of his story might instruct twenty-first-century readers. The *Lord of the Rings* is not, as some have suggested, a covert allegory of the gospel. Tolkien clearly denied that idea. We must not turn this wonderful adventure into something it was never intended to be.

Well stated. But that is exactly what the authors set out to do, as they offer allegory after allegory of how *The Lord of the Rings* is in reality the telling of the story of redemption enveloped within the framework of Tolkien's fantasy. So on one hand, they dare not make of Tolkien's work what Tolkien never intended, but on the other hand they immediately try to convince us that Tolkien evidently didn't mean what he said.

They begin their search for God in the tale by stating the truth that there is a deep yearning within men for something lost. Just as man yearns for Eden, the Fellowship of the Ring longs for the world that existed before the evil Lord Sauron had brought together the forces of evil to enslave all life in Middle Earth. If the allegory is to fit, Sauron is Satan, who has enslaved mankind to sin. Had Tolkien meant this as an allegory we might say that he was, indeed, trying to tell the Gospel story through his imaginative writing. The fact that he did not mean it as allegory demonstrates that, while there can be infused into the story what seem like parallels to truth, man's imagination is much the same whether fallen or redeemed. This is borne out by the realization that Sauron is more likely the parallel to Darth Vader in the *Star Wars* epic or to Voldemort in the *Harry Potter* series. If Sauron is Satan veiled, then so

are Darth Vader and Voldemort, and myriad other "evil" villains found in countless fantasies written by professed Christians as well as by professed atheists. How is it that non-believers tell the same story of "good" vs. "evil," yet we find no parallels to the Gospel in their stories?

Another parallel the authors offer in the Middle-earth drama is that of Ilúvatar, "maker of all that would be," with YHWH. Bruner and Ware equate his beings, Ainur, "the offspring of his thought," to God's angels. One Ainur, Melkor, decided to interweave in his music "matters of his own imagining that were not in accord with the theme of Ilúvatar."

This sure sounds like Lucifer attempting to ascend above God, doesn't it? But this is not only Lucifer; it is every man who lives in disobedience to God. It is man's imaginings that pervert the Gospel and make it something God did not intend. If Bruner and Ware are correct, this is exactly what Tolkien did by couching God's truth in the words of his own imaginings.

It is no small thing to attribute to God any name or characteristics which He does not attribute to Himself. Even Job and his friends were chastised by God for daring to speak about Him without knowledge. Even though many of the things they said were true, their presumption negated their good intentions. Yet we are to think that Tolkien's imagination and alleged parallels to truth are acceptable if couched in terms of fantasy storytelling.

Never mind that presumption on the part of Bruner and Ware abounds in their attempt to infuse into Tolkien's fantasy some semblance of biblical truth. The authors assure us that, in spite of Tolkien's denial, his fantasy brims with biblical archetypes. One such is said to be Strider, the enigmatic stranger who becomes the chief protagonist and protector of Frodo on his quest to destroy the ring lest Sauron regain control of it. About Strider, the authors say:

He is, in an important way, modeled on a series of biblical archetypes, a series that culminates in the Archetype of all archetypes: Jesus Christ himself.

If so, then Jesus feared evil within himself, just as Strider did. Strider dared not take hold of the ring lest his own dark side surrender his will to its power. If this is finding Jesus in The Lord of the Rings, I'll have none of it.

In the Ring trilogy, Frodo is the only one pure enough of heart to hold the ring without desiring to use it. Should Frodo, the Hobbit "halfling" (half man-half what?) not be the archetype of Jesus? Not only is he pure in heart, he is gentle and of a sweet spirit. He is in stark contrast to Strider—a human warrior who has managed to suppress his dark side in deference to his light side, much like Luke Skywalker in using the Force in his quest to destroy evil on an intergalactic level. If Strider is an archetype of Jesus, why is not Luke Skywalker? For that matter, why is not Harry Potter? In his quest for the Sorcerer's Stone, it turns out that only Harry Potter is pure enough in heart to hold it without attempting to use it. Just as the Ring is the source of power sought by Sauron, the Sorcerer's Stone is the source of power sought by Voldemort. Both seek to possess their respective talismans in order to rule the earth and destroy all "good."

Space does not allow for all the biblical parallels conjured by Bruner and Ware in the Ring drama. Suffice it to say that the same parallels can be found in any story of "good" vs. "evil." Truth be told, the story of Frodo and Harry Potter are much the same. But Christians think that the Harry Potter stories are "evil," while The Lord of the Rings is "good." Why? Because the Ring stories emanated from the imagination of a professed Christian (a Roman Catholic), while Harry Potter emanated from the imagination of J.K. Rowling, a non-Christian woman.

The only significant difference between Tolkien's magic and Rowling's magic is that Rowling leads children into learning the how-tos of wizardry, while Tolkien merely presents it in a positive light. But both glorify wizardry. Is Harry Potter a wizard? So is Gandalf, Tolkien's mentor to Frodo. Is the Ring an object made by an evil entity as a magical source of power for his diabolical plans? So is the Sorcerer's Stone. Is the Ring placed in the possession of an innocent of pure heart to keep it from its evil maker? So is the Sorcerer's Stone. Is Frodo that innocent? So is Harry Potter. Does "good" triumph over "evil" because of Frodo's faithfulness and courage? So it does because of Harry Potter's faithfulness and courage.

Tolkien's stories are nothing more than a retelling of ancient fairie tales. Had Tolkien not professed faith in Jesus Christ, even as a Roman Catholic, the same people lauding The Lord of the Rings today would be denouncing it as a tool of the devil. I say this because virtually the same story is told by non-believers, and no one finds the true God or Jesus in their stories. And were J. K. Rowling to profess even a nominal faith in Jesus Christ her books would be viewed in the same way as Tolkien's. They would be in Christian bookstores among the best-sellers. As it is, one such book, What's a Christian to do with Harry Potter?, does suggest that Harry Potter is suitable for Christian children.

Contrary to uninformed claims by Christians who decry her writings, Rowling is not a witch. She did her homework on witchcraft and sorcery to conjure the spells in her books, and added some from her own imagination. The real problem is that her writings steer children in the direction of witchcraft as desirable. There are many links to genuine witchcraft Web sites from Harry Potter Web sites. That there are reports of children attempting to use the magic spells and incantations found in her books is evidence enough that Christians should have nothing to do with them. But there is little difference between Rowling's wizardry and that of Tolkien.

Let us also set the record straight about the penchant of both the world and Christians to view the battle of "good" vs. "evil" in the same manner, as if evil would triumph should man lose his personal freedoms. Much evil results from man's personal freedom. True evil is anything that works contrary to the will of God as revealed in His Word. It springs not only from Satan's designs but from the fertile imagination of man. And as appealing as fantasy may be, it is evil no matter what the professed beliefs of the writer.

Tolkien's and Lewis' fantasies are virtually required reading for those who engage in fantasy role-playing games such as Dungeons and Dragons. It can be stated without fear of contradiction that Tolkien's Ring fantasies have been the greatest impetus to sword and sorcery games and writings from modern authors.

In his book, Harry Potter and the Bible, Richard Abanes makes the same mistake as other Tolkien fans. While decrying the evils of Harry Potter (rightfully so), he suggests to his readers that they read C. S. Lewis' and J. R. R. Tolkien's fantasies instead. Both Lewis and Tolkien wrote fantasies based not upon any element of their professed faith in Jesus Christ, but by their own admission they were based upon their love of

fairie tales, myths, magic and the epic folk lore of gods and goddesses.

If, in truth, Tolkien, like Lewis, did not intend for his epic to be an allegory of the Gospel, how can an entire book be written that insists Tolkien's writings are an allegory of the Gospel while acknowledging Tolkien's denial of that claim at the outset?

I'll tell you how.

Christians love things they shouldn't love. Thus, they find excuses to indulge in them. It is not uncommon for Christians to attempt the melding of the Faith with the world's enticements. How about "Christian" nightclubs; "Christian" magic, "Christian" rock and roll; "Christian" psychology; "Christian" novels; "Christian" whatever.

Scripture warns us that the world and the Faith find no agreement:

Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?

And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel?

And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you,

And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty. (2 Corinthians 6:14-18)

The melding of truth and error has plagued the Body of Christ from the very beginning. "Christian" fantasy is just one more such melding of truth and error. But it is one of the most insidious of such errors because it not only blends human wisdom with the Faith, it blends satanic wisdom, images and religious traditions with the Faith.

There is no denying the appeal that fantasy has to the carnal mind. I grew up reading fantasy and science fiction and I loved it. But there is no way a true believer can with knowledge sanction the melding of these things with the Faith in attempts to justify their own carnal pleasures.

At least Tolkien, as the author and finisher of the fantasy genre for Christians, denied that he had melded the two. In this he was more honorable than his fans who make him say what he didn't say. v