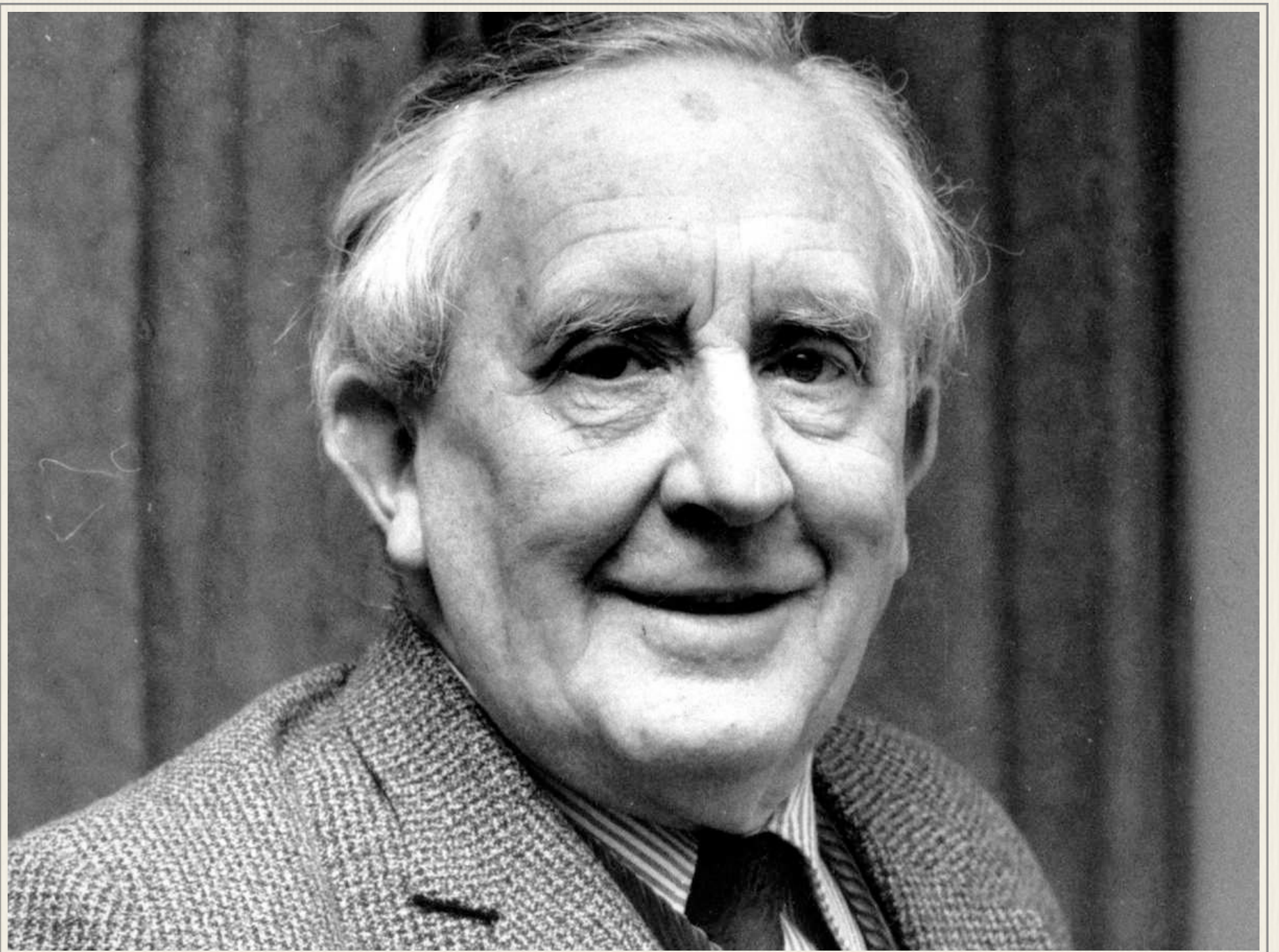




“Over the Chasm of Fire”



STRATFORD CALDECOTT
(AND J.R.R. TOLKIEN)





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by Stratford Caldecott

"Book of the Century" The Lord of the Rings (LR) is the work of a devout Catholic. Its Elvish chants are strung on melodic lines redolent of Benediction, and its moral structure comes straight out of the New Testament. This is, then, a Christian work, albeit of a genre both ages old and at the same time brilliantly original. As we move from the opening chapters set in the Shire to the wider canvas of Middle Earth, **LR manages to integrate the form of the modern novel back into the much longer tradition of epic poetry and heroic saga.** Not that Tolkien was a professional bard, praising the deeds of his tribal chief or embellishing ancient legends in some smoky castle. He was an Oxford don, a professor of languages who had to write his stories alone, deep into the night, and at the risk of his daytime reputation. The nearest he got to campfire or castle hall was the smoke-filled bar of the Eagle and Child tavern, and there with his friends the Inklings he did indeed reveal himself at home in the age-old oral tradition.

Many of Caldecott's references will seem a lot more understandable if we've read Tolkien's books (or see the movies). If the references to Tolkien's characters and world don't mean much to you, that's fine -- make sure to look for the broader ideas about myths and stories which Caldecott is trying to highlight.

Tolkien's Quest

LR is **not a flawless work**, but it is **richer and deeper than many books more carefully crafted by shallower men.** What drove Tolkien so

deep into the night was not merely the desire to tell a story, but the awareness that he was part of a story.

He may have been writing fiction, but he was telling the truth about the world as it revealed itself to him.

This statement is one of the key reasons we're taking any time at all to read about J.R.R. Tolkien and the stories he told.

And this truth he discovered as he wrote, through the very process of writing. "I always had the sense of recording what was already 'there', somewhere: not of 'inventing'," (Letters, 131); a feeling that lay behind the fictional device of the "Red Book of Westmarch" on which LR was supposedly based. In a letter to his son Christopher he admitted: "the thing seems to write itself once I get going, as if the truth comes out then, only imperfectly glimpsed in the preliminary sketch" (Letters, 91). It was a truth about himself ("I have exposed my heart to be shot at," he writes in Letters, 142), but one profound enough to be at the same time a truth about us, and about each of those millions of readers.

"After all," he wrote, "I believe that legends and myths are largely made of 'truth', and indeed present aspects of it that can only be perceived in this mode; and long ago certain truths and modes of this kind were discovered and must always reappear" (Letters, 131). This is a belief that Tolkien shared not only with the Inklings, but with their great forerunner, George MacDonald, and the entire Romantic Movement.

Tolkien's stories go beyond mere fantasy or fiction -- like the great myth-tellers and story-tellers throughout history, he has managed to capture something of the truth about what it is to be human and to integrate that truth into his stories. It's not just allegory (a genre which Tolkien greatly disliked); the characters in his stories don't "stand in," one-by-one for people from the Bible. Rather, the heroism, courage, and sacrifice of Tolkien's characters stands on its own and tells us something about the world.

In a draft letter to an admirer dated 1971, Tolkien writes of his great work, "It was written slowly and with great care for detail, & finally emerged as a Frameless Picture: a searchlight, as it were, on a brief period in History, and on a small part

of our Middle-earth, surrounded by the glimmer of limitless extensions in time and space. Very well: that may explain to some extent why it 'feels' like history; why it was accepted by for publication; and why it has proved readable for a large number of very different kinds of people. But it does not fully explain what has actually happened. Looking back on the wholly unexpected things that have followed its publication - beginning at once with the appearance of Vol. I - I feel as if an ever darkening sky over our present world had been suddenly pierced, the clouds rolled back, and an almost forgotten sunlight had poured down again. As if indeed the horns of Hope had been heard again, as Pippin heard them suddenly at the absolute nadir of the fortunes of the West. But How? and Why?" (Letters, 328). He goes on to describe how once he encountered Gandalf, in the person of a man who visited him to discuss certain old pictures that seemed almost designed to illustrate LR. The man remarks after a silence: "Of course you don't suppose, do you, that you wrote all that book yourself?"

I know a Catholic priest who reads all the way through LR once a year. Why would someone do that? Of course, people can get obsessed about anything that takes them out of themselves (I recently read of a mother and daughter who claimed to have been to see the movie Titanic 48 times). But my priest friend is not like that - and nor was I, when I read the book over and over again as I was growing up. The "truth" in myths and legends bears repeating because it cannot be taken in all at once. There are stories that we have to grow into; stories that deal with the way the world is made, and the way the Self is made. These stories are like dreams, but dreams that can be shared by an entire culture; wholesome dreams that restore a balance to the psyche by turning our energies and our thoughts towards truth; dreams that resemble an oasis in the desert. Reading them can be a bit like praying. "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, consider these things" (Phil. 4:8).

LR is about **a Quest**, but the writing of it was also a Quest, and the reading of it can be likewise. The Quest, of course, is one of the three or four "deep structures" used by story-tellers the world over. A Quest is any journey in which some difficult goal is to be achieved, some challenge must be met, some initiation has to

be undergone, some place or object or person is to be discovered or won. The reason for its perennial popularity is obvious enough. It is just such a Quest that gives meaning to our own existence. We are not where (or whom), we wish to be: to get there it is necessary to travel - even if, as G.K. Chesterton and T.S. Eliot knew so well, we travel only to arrive back at our beginning, "And know the place for the first time" (Little Gidding). We read or listen to the storyteller, then, in order to orient ourselves for this journey within. We want to learn how to behave, in order to get where we want to go. Each of us knows, deep down inside, that our life is not merely a mechanical progress from cradle to grave; it is a search for something, for some elusive treasure. The same ultimate goal motivates us in both work and play. What the storyteller depends upon is a fact of human nature: that our imagination is always reaching out beyond the limits of the known and the evident, towards the infinity of what is desired. The Quest activates our nostalgia for paradise lost, our yearning for the restoration or fulfillment to come.

The Tree of Tales

The book we know as LR is only a fragment of a much larger set of tales, most of which were not published during Tolkien's lifetime. Over the years he added to them layer by layer, filling in a vast historical canvas, weaving theme upon theme, until the whole collection resembled a great "tree of tales", seemingly as ancient as a gnarled oak. It may not have been the "mythology for England" that he once dreamed of creating (see Letters, 131), but the phrase suggests one part of his intention. He was exploring the archetypes and images of a people - his own people of northern and western Europe. Each particular story had to appear to belong to a much larger and more ancient body of literature in order to evoke the symbolic resonances without which it would fail to cast its spell. There had to be a sense of great vistas of time and space around and behind each story, as there is in the legends of a people like the Norsemen or the Celts, each of which comes down to us out of its own tremendous "mythic space", an imaginal dimension where dramatic

action "interprets eternity to time and time to eternity" (if I may quote my mother, the folklorist Moyra Caldecott).

To discover such a mythic space, Tolkien had to go in search of the very springs of the imagination. As C.S. Lewis put it, he had to penetrate a kind of "veil" to the inner core of human creativity, into the place where language is born. He had to go "inside language". The artificial languages we encounter in his work were therefore not developed merely to decorate his stories, or to create the illusion of authenticity - although they certainly do function that way. More importantly, the stories and the languages emerged from the same source and at the same time. The stories were born first as poetry; only later as prose. This is as it should be, for of the two forms, poetry is the more concentrated and direct expression of experience.

As a philologist (a **researcher and teacher of language**), Tolkien was well prepared for his personal Quest. Already at school he had taught himself nearly a dozen languages. And as a Christian, he knew that "In the beginning was the Word.... In him was life, and the life was the light of men." His own mythology begins with the creation. The One God, Iluvatar, brings the world into existence with the word "Eä! Let these things Be!", sending into the void the Flame Imperishable. Behind the actual moment of creation lies the Music of the Ainur, the harmony of the archetypes. But Eä, the "World that Is" begins, as in the Book of Genesis, with Word and with Light.

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A Mythology for Oxfordshire

We come at last to *The Lord of the Rings* itself - in which Tolkien builds a bridge from the imaginal landscapes of his Northern "Dreamtime" to our own Age, the Age of Men. LR begins and ends in the "Shire", a pure archetype of the semi-rural England that Tolkien loved, still recognizable in parts of Oxfordshire. (He himself in one place likens the Shire to a village in Warwickshire – but a village called Buckland lies only a half-hour's drive from Broad Street.) The Quest it describes is, on the surface of things, a quest not to find a treasure but to lose one.

The ring of invisibility acquired by Bilbo Baggins from Gollum in *The Hobbit* is discovered to be the long-lost Ring of Power forged by the Dark Lord, greatest servant of Morgoth (himself now exiled from the world), in the fires of Mount Doom. It will inevitably corrupt the wearer, or return to its maker, enabling him to conquer Middle Earth, unless it is unmade in the place of its creation. As Bilbo's heir, Frodo undertakes the Quest, supported by his servant Sam and friends Merry and Pippin. In a sense, then, the Quest to destroy the Ring before it is captured by the Enemy is, after all, a Quest for treasure: the treasure in this case being not the Ring itself but lasting security for the idyll of the Shire, Tolkien's idyll, which we find is already compassed about with danger and threatened by corruption from within. The application to our own predicament is brought out by the fact that Tolkien describes the moral corruption eating away at the Shire as having a very clear physical expression: smokestacks, pollution and deforestation - in fact all the paraphernalia of industrial modernity. [On this theme see Patrick Curry's *Defending Middle-Earth: Tolkien, Myth and Modernity*: Floris, Edinburgh, 1997.] LR therefore reaches two distinct climaxes. The first of these is the destruction of the Dark Lord in Mordor and the coronation of Aragorn as King Elessar in Gondor. The second climax, however, is in a way more important: Tolkien calls it the "scouring of the Shire". We could perhaps call it the "scouring of Oxfordshire", a task that in our world must await the heroes of this new millennium.

The richness of the book's texture (a richness that makes it more like real life) is enhanced by the fact that it has many heroes. Each of the main characters has his own personal Quest, and Tolkien interweaves all these destinies in something of the way different lives are woven together in the real world. Frodo, of course, is the main protagonist and "Ringbearer", the one to whom the White Council entrusts the mission to destroy the Ring. The man Strider is at first merely a mysterious outsider, a guide and companion for the Hobbits, but emerges as true hero by winning the throne of the two kingdoms of Middle Earth along with the hand of his Elven princess. The third main hero is the wizard Gandalf, leader of the nine Companions of the Ring and coordinator of the campaign against the Dark Lord throughout Middle Earth.

Even more clearly than in *The Silmarillion*, heroism in LR takes an unmistakably Christian form. Each of the three main heroes I have mentioned is a kind of "Christ-figure". Each offers his life for others, each passes through darkness and even a kind of death to a kind of resurrection. Gandalf defends the Companions against the demonic Balrog on the narrow bridge of Moria, and falls with his enemy into the fiery pit. Victorious in death, he is eventually "sent back", no longer as Gandalf the Grey, but endowed with even greater authority and power as Gandalf the White. Strider/Aragorn also "harrows hell" by daring the Paths of the Dead under the haunted mountain, and summons the spirits of the dead oath-breakers to his side at the black stone of Erech. Finally, Frodo passes through Shelob's impenetrable darkness under Minas Morgul, through an unconsciousness that Sam cannot distinguish from death, into the Land of Shadow itself. But in his case, identification with the suffering Christ continues even after the victory achieved by so many sacrifices. His wounds, through which he becomes increasingly "full of light", can never entirely be healed in Middle Earth. From the Grey Havens he passes into the West, his departure with the great Elves and Gandalf marking the end of the Third Age of the world.

The book, however, does not end even with Frodo's departure. It ends with Sam returning from the Havens and sitting down with his baby daughter in his lap. This brings us to the fourth and - I would argue - central hero of LR: Samwise Gamgee. For it is Sam, more than Frodo, who is the incarnation of the Shire, and most deeply rooted in its soil. In LR, Sam's growing to maturity and the healing of the Shire go hand in hand. This makes perfect sense, for, as Tolkien once wrote (*Letters*, 181), the plot is concerned with "the ennoblement (or sanctification) of the humble." LR is a story in which "the first will be last and the last will be first." The Hobbits are humble, and Sam is the humblest of Hobbits, a servant without pretensions or ambitions - except perhaps to have a garden of his own. For him to leave the Shire out of love for his Master Frodo involves a great sacrifice. In a sense, he has to sacrifice the Shire itself - consciously when he sees the threat to the Shire in Galadriel's Mirror but still determines to go on. It is fidelity to Frodo that remains his guiding star throughout. The plans of the Wise and the fate of Middle Earth are never his concern. He only knows he has to do his bit

and help his master, however hopeless the task may seem. At a crucial moment in Mordor he must carry the Ringbearer and even the Ring itself. He moves from immature to mature innocence; and finally, back in his own sphere (which is Tolkien's own inner world of the Shire) the gardener and healer of gardens becomes a "king" - or at least a Mayor. In fact, the Appendices tells us that he was elected Mayor of the Shire no less than seven times, and it is to him that King Elessar will in the end entrust the Star of the Dunedain, representing the crown of the North Kingdom.

To read LR as, in a special way, Sam's story, makes it even more our story. The great events of the book begin as well as end with Sam. A self-professed lover of tales about Elves and dragons, caught by Gandalf eavesdropping under Frodo's window at Bag End, Sam is hauled in by the ears and becomes part of the action from that moment on. In all of this, he represents you and me, the reader. Like him, we love stories about Elves. We too are "caught by the ears" and yanked over the threshold into the world of the Quest, a Quest that promises the transformation of the mundane into the magical.

The Triumph of Mercy

Transformation, however, comes at a price. Evil must be faced and overcome. Gollum, despised and outcast, represents the weakness and evil that lurks in the soul of a Hobbit - even of a Hobbit like Sam. In Jungian terms, Gollum is Sam's (and Frodo's) Shadow. Sam frequently advises Frodo to kill him when he has the chance. The hatred between them is one of the themes of their journey into the Land of Shadow itself. On some level there is a connection between the vulnerability of Sam to that hatred for a Hobbit long ago corrupted by the Ring and the evident vulnerability of the Shire to the corruption of modernity, the corruption brought upon it by Saruman during the War of the Ring. Hobbiton can only be healed by the reordering of the Hobbit soul; and Sam's soul is only reordered and healed at the very end of the Quest, on the side of Mount Doom, by first sparing and finally forgiving Gollum.

The Ring is a symbol of pride and power. It represents everything that draws us into the kingdom of the Dark Lord by tempting us to become like him. Its circular shape is that of the will closed upon itself. Its empty centre suggests the void into which we thrust ourselves by using the Ring. The invisibility with which it cloaks the wearer at the same time severs our normal relationships with those around us. We all have such a Ring: it forms the foundations of our own Dark Tower, namely the Ego, the false self. Our Quest, like Frodo's and Sam's, is to renounce the Ring and be rid of the hold it has over us, ultimately on the path that only Christ has travelled to the end: by sacrificing himself for his friends. If this is what the Ring means, its renunciation is impossible, as Tolkien saw, without help from "outside", from beyond ourselves. (In theology this is called grace.) The self cannot unmake the self. "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it," as St Paul says (Rom. 7:18-19). On the very brink of success, Frodo's free will having taken him as far as it can, the Ringbearer dramatically renounces the Quest and claims the Ring for his own. His freedom to cast it away has been eroded by the task of bearing it to Mount Doom. What finally saves him is an apparent accident, which is in fact the direct consequence of his own earlier (and freer) decision to spare the life of Gollum. That was an act of pure compassion. Thus in a way it is not Frodo who saves Middle Earth at all. Even less is it Gollum, who bites the Ring from his hand and in so doing falls into the Fire. It is not even Sam, who has learned compassion from Frodo, and without whom Frodo would never have reached Mount Doom. The Saviour of Middle Earth turns out to be One who works through the love and freedom of his creatures, and who forgives us our trespasses "as we forgive those who trespass against us" (Letters, 181), using even our mistakes and the designs of the Enemy (as already hinted in *The Silmarillion*) to bring about our good. The ending of LR is a triumph of Providence over Fate, but it is also a triumph of Mercy, in which free will, supported by grace, is fully vindicated.

The Quest achieved, waiting to be engulfed in the ruin of Mount Doom, Sam sighs to Frodo, "What a tale we have been in, Mr Frodo, haven't we? I wish I could hear it told! Do you think they'll say: Now comes the story of Nine-Fingered Frodo and the Ring of Doom? And then everyone will hush, like we did, when in Rivendell they told us the tale of Beren One-Hand and the Great Jewel. I wish I could

hear it! And I wonder how it will go on after our part." To the reader, Frodo and Sam are characters in a story; to Frodo and Sam, their adventures are real life and the world of "story" lies elsewhere - in the ancient tales they have heard from Bilbo and the Elves. But in this crucial moment of insight, Sam has bridged the gap, and seen their own lives as part of a great tale full of wonder and meaning, that stretches from the beginning of time to its mysterious end. In the same moment, he overcomes the distance between himself and the reader of the tale of Frodo and the Ring of Doom. We live, not in another world, but in an extension of his.

Sam's significant reference to Beren One-Hand is reinforced by a slightly earlier remark of his on Mount Doom, immediately after Gollum falls into the Fire. "The burden was gone. His master had been saved; he was himself again, he was free. And then Sam caught sight of the maimed and bleeding hand. 'Your poor hand!' he said. 'And I have nothing to bind it with, or comfort it. I would have spared him a whole hand of mine rather. But he's gone now beyond recall, gone for ever.'" The desire to grasp is finally renounced; the grasping Shadow falls into the Fire and is forgiven. Frodo has lost a finger, and humble Sam may see him as the great hero, but by that remark and the spirit it reveals it is Sam himself who is conformed to Beren One-Hand; Sam, not Frodo, whose touch will bring the Shire back to life in a new golden age.

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The Fall of Man opened a chasm filled with fire between the real and the ideal; between truth and goodness. The bridge of beauty is damaged beyond repair, yet join the two sides we must, by making our own existence into a path across the Abyss for others: everyone who does so becomes both Hero and King. In the Biblical Book of Revelation we are told: "To him who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone which no one knows except him who receives it" (2:17). This "new name" is the eternal identity, the transfigured personality, the hidden treasure that each of us is here on earth to discover. But it is not a matter of discovery only, but one of making, of subcreation. God is waiting for the response of our freedom. Our own

choice, our own creativity, is essential to the drama, and this makes the world a drama fraught with real peril.

Tolkien saw in the Christian revelation the meeting and fusing of Legend and History, and in the Body of Christ the restored bridge from this world to the other. All along our hearts spoke true. They were made for what they long to find; nature was made for grace. The Maker himself has once and for all vindicated those fleeting glimpses of "Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief," which art affords us.