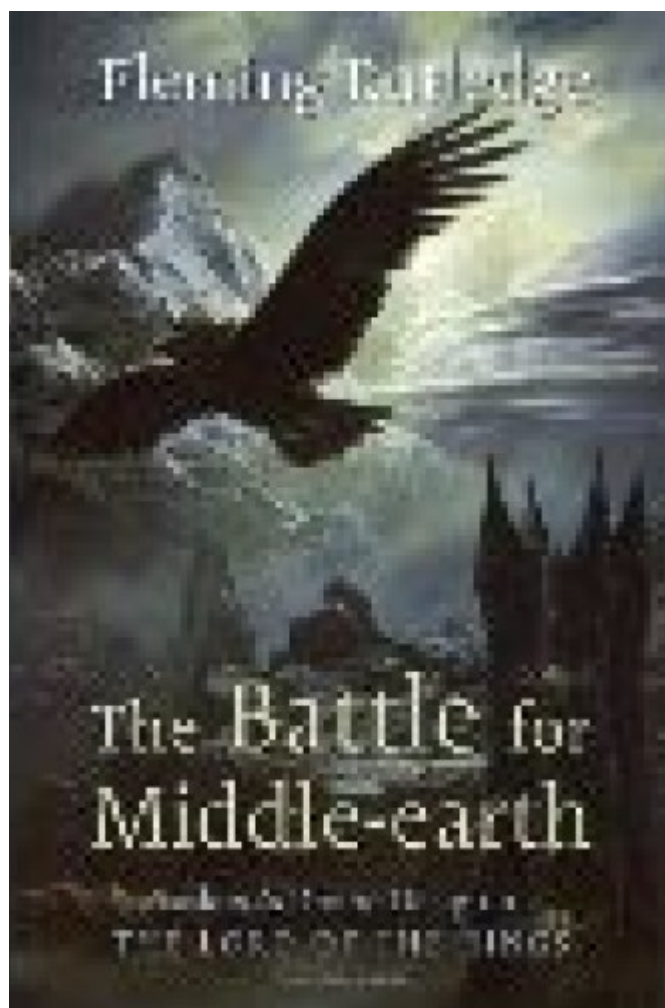


The Battle for Middle-Earth

reviewed by [Rob Spach](#) in the [April 5, 2005](#) issue

In Review



The Battle for Middle-Earth: Tolkien's Divine Design in the Lord of the Rings

Fleming Rutledge
Eerdmans

By the time I finished this book, I was convinced of Fleming Rutledge's fundamental claim: that the view of reality conveyed in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* not only is biblical but is an "almost exact replica" of the apocalyptic worldview that informs many New Testament texts.

An Episcopal priest who has written several books on religion and culture, Rutledge acknowledges at the outset that she is "a Tolkien amateur"—someone who loves his work but is not a Tolkien scholar. Yet she writes with insight and sophistication about the cosmic battle portrayed in the *Ring* saga, demonstrating that Tolkien's Catholic faith inspired him to tell an essentially but not explicitly Christian story set in a place that is a representation of the pre-Christian era of our own world.

Rutledge dismisses the oft-repeated claim that Tolkien's epic depicts a struggle between good and evil. Rather, she contends, Tolkien portrays a battle in which there are three players: God, creatures (the various races populating Middle-Earth), and a powerful, malevolent, aggressive enemy (which the apostle Paul calls the "powers and principalities" of the present age). In this battle, the creatures of Middle-Earth, especially the small and lowly, play a significant part, at great cost to themselves, for the sake of the triumph of God. Rutledge refers to this battle as the "deep narrative" that lies beneath and profoundly shapes the "surface narrative" of Tolkien's tale.

Commenting on nearly every major scene in the *Ring* saga, Rutledge teases out the biblical underpinnings and theological insights that inform the plot and the portrayals of the characters. She explores Tolkien's careful depiction of the bondage of the creaturely will to the enemy, as well as the ways in which God's active agency is suggested throughout the narrative. Since she approaches Tolkien's work not thematically but in narrative sequence, with a chapter on *The Hobbit* and on each of the six books into which Tolkien originally divided *The Lord of the Rings*, her commentary often becomes repetitious. For example, by the fifth or sixth time she points out the use of the passive voice to convey the agency of God, the reader is quite familiar with how Tolkien portrays God's presence without making God a character.

Among the many themes Rutledge highlights are the relationship between predestination and free will, the nature of true freedom and true service, the character of good and bad leadership, the relations between fathers and sons, the

nature of hope, the church as a “community of resistance” in occupied territory, the potency of self-sacrifice for the sake of the “age to come,” and the significance of mercy for the outworking of God’s purposes in the world.

Rutledge makes wonderful use of Tolkien’s letters to support her claims about the Christian dimensions of the narrative. Her familiarity with contemporary biblical scholarship and her pastoral sensitivities enable her both to make informed judgments about Tolkien’s purposes and to apply his theological insights to contemporary situations. She observes, for example, that in a conversation with Gandalf, Saruman takes the position that the end justifies the means, and she comments that the same argument is used today to justify torturing prisoners of war. “The hoary argument for using evil means to obtain a good end is the road to perdition. The truth of life is that we have very little control over the ‘ends’ because of the law of unintended consequences.”

Though Rutledge’s book is perhaps a bit too long, it will appeal to readers who enjoy Tolkien’s works and appreciate theological reflection. Her analysis certainly sheds light on Tolkien’s genius for telling a story rooted in the gospel that takes place in a pre-Christian setting. She makes a compelling case that through symbolism, suggestion and plot, and by steering clear of simplistic moralism and pedantic allegory, Tolkien intended to convey a New Testament vision of reality that invites readers to self-analysis in the midst of God’s battle against the powers that seek to enslave and destroy us in this world.