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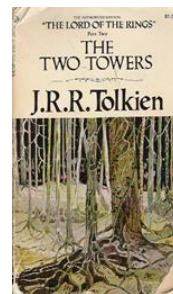
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Book Review

Faith and the Fellowship, as shown through Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers

Matthew Stewart

There are times when one is faced with a task that seems impossible, yet an attempt must be made to complete it. That task may not be literally impossible, but may be so perilous with more chances of failure than success that its undertakers may doubt they can ever complete it. Another task may seem pointless to carry on with, given one's circumstances, or the doomed natures of those involved. This is the case with many characters in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Characters in the classic fantasy epic are faced with several impossible or seemingly fruitless tasks and yet they strive, against the odds and against themselves, to complete what is burdened to them. What keeps these characters moving forward, towards their goals, is faith. Faith is expressed through a variety of characters and in a variety of ways. In the first chapters of the second novel of the trilogy, *The Two Towers*, the Fellowship has broken and yet they struggle on, holding out that Frodo – the Ring bearer – will complete the journey to Mount Doom to dispose of the One Ring. The Ringbearer continues his trek through the deadened territory in the East of Middle-Earth, supported by the faith in his purpose embodied in his friend and servant Sam. Far away from Mordor, Treebeard the Ent faithfully continues his duties as protector of the forest despite battles of good and evil raging inside and out. Faith drives the characters to fulfill their purposes throughout the series, and notably in *The Two Towers*.



The Two Towers begins immediately where *The Fellowship of the Ring* left its readers, with the breaking of the Fellowship, the group made up of the main characters. *Fellowship* introduced the reader to these characters and to the tasks they would be responsible for completing. First, and most notable, is Frodo the hobbit who is given a ring as a gift from his uncle which possesses magical properties. Following him are his hobbit companions, Samwise, who will accompany him through the entirety of his journey, and Pippin and Merry, two friends who refuse to allow Frodo and Sam to leave their home of the Shire alone. They are lead away from their home by the wizard Gandalf, who is wise and aged and who revealed to Frodo that his uncle's ring is a very particular ring that had once belonged to Sauron, an evil entity bent on the enslavement of Middle-Earth. With them is Aragorn, or Strider as the hobbits know him, a man who, despite being a Ranger from the North of Middle-Earth, is the descendant of the last King of Gondor. Meaning that he is secretly one of, if not the single, most important human characters in the story. Boromir joins them as well, another human, and the son of the Steward of Gondor who is currently reigning in Middle-Earth. He is a strong and stout man who desires nothing more than to be rid of the powers of evil, sometimes to the detriment of his own well meaning. Gimli, a dwarf, and Legolas, an elf, join the Fellowship as protectors of the Ring bearer and servants of good. Together the entire group of nine, the Fellowship of the Ring, set out to take the Ring to Mordor in the Southeast of Middle-Earth. The breaking of the Fellowship begins when

Gandalf is lost in a fall battling an immense evil creature in the Mines of Moria, an ancient dwarven underground kingdom. Strider then takes position as leader of the Fellowship and leads them on away from Moria. They arrive in an elven territorial forest and are invited to spend time to grieve for Gandalf, and to rest to prepare for the next leg of their journey. Upon leaving they are sent down river on elven boats with many provisions. As they prepare to camp in an area downriver some time later Boromir attacks Frodo, aiming to take from him the magical ring to use against the enemy in Mordor. When Frodo escapes and disappears into the forest, Boromir returns to the camp to discover they are under attack from a group of orcs known as the Fighting Uruk-hai, who are physically larger and stronger than their orc cousins. Boromir fights to protect the remaining hobbits –both Frodo and Sam have now been lost in the forest- and is finally felled by a barrage of arrows. Frodo and Sam depart unseen in an elven boat and cross the river to head east, and Merry and Pippin are taken away by the fleeing Uruk-hai, and the Fellowship is broken. *The Two Towers* picks up here.

Boromir is lying, wounded, when Aragorn finds him after the battle surrounded by slain orcs and pierced with arrows. Their conversation is short. Boromir starts with his confession. “I tried to take the Ring from Frodo,’ he said. ‘I am sorry. I have paid.’”¹ He continues to explain the two hobbits he was protecting, Merry and Pippin, have been taken away by the orcs and admits this as a failure. Aragorn is quick to refute this, and tells Boromir that any wrongdoing he may have done in attempting to forcefully relieve Frodo of the Ring has been redeemed in his bravery in protecting the other hobbits and in valiantly fighting the monstrous Uruk-hai. Boromir has lost faith in his own gallantry. He no longer believes that he is fighting for the forces of good. After he approached Frodo out of ill will to take the Ring to use selfishly, and awakens from his semi-madness brought on by the want of the Ring and its power, he no longer believes that he is good. His faith in his own goodness is gone after his sins. He believes that his payment for his actions is his pain and death. Aragorn views it differently. He believes in the redemptive forces of Boromir’s valiant deeds in protecting the other Hobbits, and that his death is a shame and a great loss to mankind in Middle-Earth. Gimli, Legolas, and Aragorn, send Boromir off in a style suited for a great warrior, and sing a song to honour him. This scene, though short with the added haste of the characters’ need to depart and save the hobbits, shows a great deal of faith in the redemptive power of a good deed. Despite the fact that Boromir came close to sabotaging the entire journey, his acts of bravery earned him the admiration of his companions, and a warrior’s funeral.

The story then turns to Merry and Pippin, who are now the orc’s captives. Their unfortunate circumstances seem to worsen as they are carried farther away from the remaining Fellowship. They finally have their chance to escape when the party of orcs is ambushed by a group of horsemen known as the Riders of Rohan. Merry and Pippin quickly cut their ties and flee to the nearby Fanghorn Forest, wherein they encounter Treebeard. After being convinced that the Merry and Pippin are not orcs, the Ent – a conscious walking tree – Treebeard tells the hobbits the tales of his time in Middle-Earth and of his kind that reside in the forest. To fully understand Treebeard, first, Wizards must be understood in the context of Tolkien’s mythologies.

Wizards, such as Gandalf the Grey, Saruman the White, Radagast the Brown, and the two Blue Wizards are very powerful and very old peoples of Middle-Earth. Since it is implied

¹ Tolkien, J.R.R., 1965. *The Two Towers. The Lord of the Rings*. 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company), 16

that Wizards are not human, or members of any other common race, as well as Gandalf speaking of the Ages of Middle-Earth with knowledge that suggests he has lived them, the reader can assume that Wizards are of their own race and class. In *The Silmarillion* it is revealed that the Wizards travelled to Middle-Earth from the West over the sea. To the East lies Mordor, a dead place where Sauron, an evil similar to a Satan like figure, amasses a legion of orcs and other creatures. If the reader equates this to Hell, they can then make the assumption that Middle-earth is the equivalent of Earth in reality. The West, where the Wizards are from and where they, the elves, and Ringbearers eventually depart, can then be seen as Middle-Earth's Heaven. Gandalf and the Wizards, having left the West to arrive in Middle-Earth, are angelic beings taking the form of men, and exhibiting a much longer life span and vastness in knowledge and magical powers. Gandalf the Grey in particular can be seen as a Christ like figure, having sacrificed himself only to be reborn as Gandalf the White.² Treebeard, similar to the Wizards, is comparable to an earthly deity, through his age and presence in the forests of Middle-Earth, in which one can half faith. He is, also like Christ, a shepherd –he goes so far as to call himself a “treeherd-” and his story is comparable to one told by Jesus, which will be addressed soon. It is from here that the reader learns, as the hobbits do, the faithful duties to which Treebeard and the other ents adhere to, and the adversaries they deal with while doing so. He respects Gandalf, claiming him to be, “the only wizard that really cares about trees.” This respect, and how it is spoken, suggests that Treebeard views Gandalf, whose arrival in Middle-Earth he can recall, as an equal. Though neither would say outright, from their cryptic self-descriptions, both Gandalf and Treebeard are assumed to be wise and powerful in their own regards. Treebeard's power lies in the caretaking and commandment of Fanghorn Forest. He speaks of trees, “Some are quite wide awake, and a few are, well, ah, well getting *Entish*. That's going on all the time,” he says. This being awake, or Entishness, of trees, is a sort of spirit or soul that flows through the forest. “When that happens to a tree,” he continues,

you find that some have *bad* hearts. Nothing to do with their wood: I do not mean that. Why I knew some old willows down the Entwash, gone long ago, alas! That were quite hollow, indeed they were falling to pieces, but as quiet and sweet spoken as a young leaf. And then there are some trees in the valleys under the mountains, sound as a bell, and bad right through. That sort of thing seems to spread. There used to be some dangerous parts in this country. There are still some black patches.³

Treebeard describes his trees as being both good and bad, and yet he protects and cares for them all. Like the story told of the shepherd who loses his 100th sheep and who, despite the other ninety-nine being safe, sets off in search of the lost sheep and rejoices when it is found, Treebeard loves each tree and knows them as intimately as individuals. He also expresses his faith in his trees by continuing to care for them despite his inevitably becoming more “treeish” and having no form of reproduction since the disappearance of the Entwives.

The Entwives, the reader can assume, are the female version of the Ent as it is expressed that they are needed to reproduce more young Ents. Treebeard explains to Merry and Pippin that the Entwives have long since disappeared from Middle-Earth. In spite of their

² Tolkien, J. R. R. 1977. *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien. (Boston: George Allen & Unwin), 299-300.

³ Tolkien, *Towers*, 71

long departure the Ents continue to sing for them to return and work amongst the trees. Treebeard knows that without an Entwife present, when he becomes treeish, the lines of Ents will be finished. He knows his kind is doomed, yet continuously fulfills his duties as treeherd.⁴ Treebeard is, in many ways shown to be similar to Gandalf, a Christ like figure. Like Christ he takes the form of those he seeks to help, yet is divine in comparison. He does not ignore those who are bad, nor good, and despite his knowledge of his own eventual death –or treeishness in this case- he continues his work in caring for those he is meant to care for.

The story then shifts again to the Fellowship and their taking refuge in the stronghold of Helm's Deep. The place itself is representative of a faith that a stronghold will not fall. It is, in the story, the defining stand of the entirety of the race of man. If it holds through the orkish onslaught there is a chance that man will survive the Middle-Earth wide version of the same when Sauron finally unleashes his full armies. Though practically everyone involved seems to doubt the stronghold, or the amount of forces there to defend it, they gather behind the walls and prepare for the coming siege. The rain that falls as the battle begins is baptismal. It washes away the doubt and replaces it with a strong sense of a just war. There is no more time for doubt when the fighting begins. This is where the love between Gimli and Legolas shows strong. As the two count their kills, they speak to one another as if they know, factually, that both will be on the other side of the battle. Their competition covers any doubt that either of the friends might have.

The Fellowship does not seem to waiver in their faith, but even this can be interpreted as a doubt. They refuse to allow themselves to admit their own doubt despite the battle turning for the orc's favour in the night. The friendly competition is a way to distract the elf and the dwarf from their seemingly inevitable defeat. Aragorn in particular seems to have the strongest conviction in the battle. Looking out on the Uruk-hai he says, "I looked out to see the dawn." The answer is disheartening, "What of the dawn? We are the Uruk-hai: we do not stop the fight for night or day...what of the dawn?"⁵ With the arrival of the dawn, however, comes the Riders of Rohan and Gandalf the White. Their cavalry charge, along with the help of a grouping of deadly trees sent by the Ents, reinforces the outer walls of the stronghold, which sees the ending of the night and the orcs defeated. The rain has stopped and the sun has risen.

Finally the reader reaches the end of the Fellowship's adventures in this volume. The second half of *The Two Towers* then follows the Ring bearer through his journey towards Mordor and its hellish outlands and dangerous mountainscapes. Soon the two hobbits, Frodo and Sam, are joined by a particularly dangerous ally who has been following them, or more specifically following the Ring, since the Mines of Moria in the *Fellowship of the Ring*: Gollum. He is captured by the hobbits and short time later Frodo releases him from his chains when he promises to help by choice. This character is split into two separate personalities: Gollum who represents a fallen faith. He no longer believes in anything but his idolatrous need to repossess the Ring, which he lost in a previous volume to Frodo's uncle. His overactive idolatry pushes him to help his captors simply to be near his coveted object; and Sméagol who is a rebirthed sense of self. His faith in friendship and kindness is rekindled by Frodo's mercy and belief that there is good left in the aged, twisted creature.⁶

⁴ Tolkien, *Towers*, 78-79.

⁵ Tolkien, *Towers*, 145.

⁶ Tolkien, *Towers*, 209-226, 327-336.

Frodo knows he is dutifully obliged to continue and finish his trek to Mordor, but frequently accepts that he is never going home. He predicts and fears that he will die at –if not on the way to– his destination of Mount Doom in Mordor. He carries his burden with ill acceptance and doubts his own ability to fulfill his promise. His only salvation comes from Sam’s belief in him. Samwise has dutifully followed his master away from the Fellowship and is, under command of Gandalf –made an even greater command now that he knows Gandalf to have fallen to his death in Moria– determined to never leave his side. Sam is an embodiment of the faith of duty. He routinely mentions his disdain for the journey, and it’s near impossible feats, but continues to push Frodo towards his goal. He is not only facing his own duty of assisting Frodo, but also urges Frodo to face his own duty of taking the one Ring to Mordor. Sam is ready to lose, and does lose, almost everything in order to fulfill his purpose in Frodo’s story which he frequently and humbly leaves himself out of. Sam sees himself as unimportant. He knows, and is determined to see Frodo return to their home in the Shire. Sam believes this so deeply that he sacrifices his own food to his master, in hopes that the trip will last even just a few more hours near the end. When Gollum is determined to be the prevailing personality and betrays the Ringbearers by leading them to Shelob’s Lair to be attacked by the massive Spider, Sam is presented with a difficult choice. The stinger of the beast, seemingly, kills Frodo, yet Samwise knows the Ring needs to finish the trek to Mount Doom. Despite his immense sadness for the loss of his master he picks up the Ring, determined to take on the duty himself, and finish the journey. The burden is now his, and he has become a Ringbearer like Frodo and Gollum before him.⁷ It is here the volume ends, preceding the end of the epic in *The Return of the King*.

Faith is a strong presence in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The Ringbearers are the front-runners for the burden of faith in their duty. They know against all odds that they must finish the task that has been assigned to them. Despite the knowledge that they are likely to die on their journey, they understand that for the good of Middle-Earth they must rid the world of the weapon the evil lord of Mordor seeks. When one falls, the other must take up that burden to complete the task. They are doomed to suffer through the trek to Mount Doom, and, though they are desperately saddened by their predicament, they valiantly take one step after another. The Ents and Wizards act as humble deities. The Wizards actively influence the realms of men, elves, and others, while the Ents remain neutral to all but their trees. A mutual respect for one another, and an ancient kind of wisdom flow through the relationships these beings make. Their followers hold a faith in them, just as they hold faith in their followers. They are the shepherds of Middle-Earth, and rejoice in the redemption of their subjects, redemption such as that achieved by Boromir in his protecting the hobbits in his final battle with the Uruk-hai. His lack of faith in his own redemptive good deeds is countered with the overwhelming faith from Aragorn. Faith, whether or not it was Tolkien’s aim, flows through these novels and through the characters within.

Additional Reference

Dickerson, Matthew T. 2004. *Following Gandalf: Epic battles and moral victory in the lord of the rings*. 4th ed. Michigan: Brazos Press.

⁷ Tolkien, *Towers*, 337-352.